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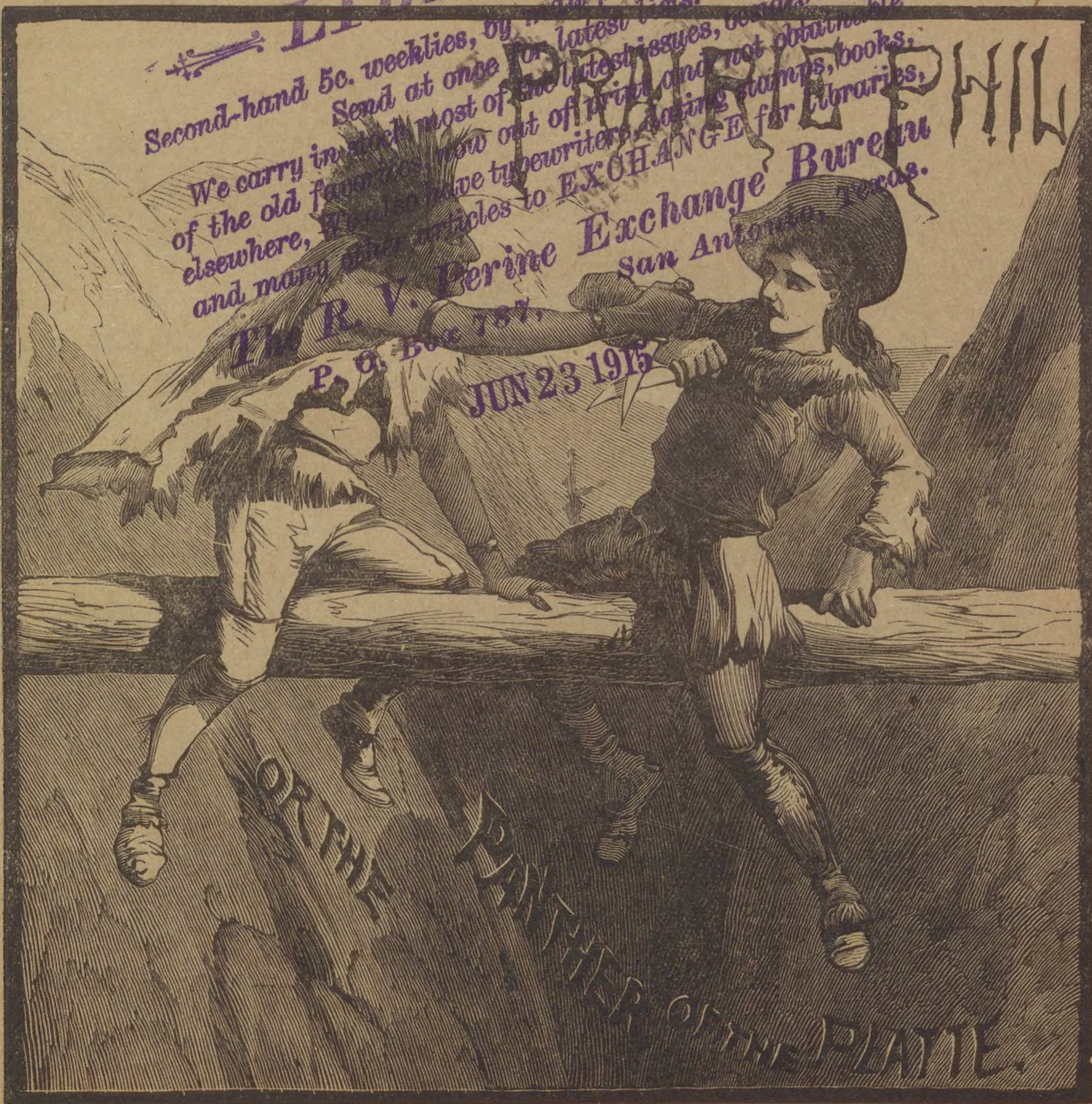
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PHIL
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OF THE PLATTE.

PRAIRIE PHIL;

OR,

THE PANTHER OF THE PLATTE.

By HARRY ROCKWOOD.

Author of "Alleghany Abe," "Mark, the Fearless," "Little Firelock," "Burk Buckley," Etc., Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER I.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

A SHARP, quick report, a wild yell of death-agony, a riderless pony dashing over the prairie with the speed of the wind.

Then came a chorus of savage yells, so loud, so fierce and vengeful that a man less brave and reckless than the one pursued might well turn pale with terror.

On—on came the painted and plumed pursuers, numbering a full score; and on—on bounded the great black steed of Prairie Phil, his shining flanks flecked with foam, his nostrils quivering with the excitement of the chase.

Lithe of form, fair of face, the young fugitive looked like some youthful god, so perfect were his proportions, so faultlessly graceful were his movements.

The bridle-rein lay upon the arched neck of the horse, untouched by the hand of his rider. Absolutely heedless of his course seemed the youth, for his keen grey eyes were directed toward his pursuers, while he rapidly reloaded his rifle, which he had just discharged with such deadly effect. His red, girlish lips were tightly closed with an expression of grim determination that boded ill to his enemies; for, boy though he was, Prairie Phil was more hated, and his rifle more feared by the savage foe, than that of many an older scout. Reckless of all peril, he braved danger that one might shudder to think of, while he passed through them all as though possessed of a charmed life.

In a moment the rifle was re-loaded, and again turning in his saddle, the youth sent another messenger of death into the ranks of his enemies. There was a second wail of death-agony, and a second pony dashed riderless away from its comrades.

"He'll know no more sorrow, nor suffering, I reckon," muttered the boy, a humorous twinkle coming into his eyes. "I wish they would give up this thing, though, for I can't afford the time to fool with them now. My services are needed more at the Bend just at this time. But the varmints do hate to give up the prospect of laying me out for the coyotes to feed upon. They ought to know better than to try it, though, for them government rifles of theirs can't harm a hair of my head at this distance, even if they knew how to handle them. And what's more, their mustangs can no more overtake my Blackbird than they can a tornado from the northwest. Jingoos! but this would be nothing but fun if I had nothing else to do.

As he said this, the young guide, for such he was by profession, suddenly seized the bridle-rein with one hand and drew it taut, uttering at the same instant a low, peculiar whistle. Recognizing the signal, Blackbird quickened his bounds, until he seemed to fly over the undulating prairie with the swiftness of the bird after which he was named.

Again Phil glanced back at his pursuers.

Then he laughed softly to himself, for he beheld them urging their little mustangs to their utmost speed, while they fell rapidly behind, despite their efforts.

Yet, they seemed in no way inclined to abandon the pursuit, hopeless as it looked. Prairie Phil could not help wondering at their persistence. He had already taught them a severe lesson with his rifle, and they must know by this time that their horses were no match, either in speed or endurance, for his. If his present course only brought him nearer Cottonwood Bend, he would not have cared for their pursuit. But it did not.

Instead, he knew that every bound of Blackbird bore him further and further from his goal.

He glanced ahead of him for the first time, noting the direction in which he was going. As he did so he gave utterance to a cry of dismay. Less than a half mile ahead was a narrow creek, its banks fringed with cottonwoods, its course running at right angles with his own. But it was not that which caused his dismay. From among the cottonwoods a thin wreath of smoke was rising heavenward; and in close proximity upon the open prairie more than half a hundred mustangs were grazing.

Too well did the young guide realize his situation. While his noble steed was easily distancing the pursuing foe, he was at the same time bearing him with terrible certainty toward an equally imminent danger. Now he understood the seemingly blind persistence of his red pursuers. They knew that they were driving him toward the encampment of their comrades—toward certain destruction.

With quick presence of mind Prairie Phil altered the course of his horse, going in a direction parallel with the creek. This was his only chance for escape, and if the savages encamped among the cottonwoods had not seen him, there was still hope of eluding them. But at the very instant that he changed his course, he heard a shout from beyond the grazing mustangs, and in another moment a dozen painted warriors emerged from the thicket, mounted, and came toward him, yelling like so many demons.

Now it became a ride for life in deadly earnest, for his new pursuers' steeds were fresh, and capable of a longer chase than his own. This was not all. They were sufficiently close to place him in danger from their rifles. Of this fact he soon had substantial evidence.

Several sharp, whip-like reports rang on the air, and he felt a painful twinge upon his left arm. At first he feared that the limb was disabled, for it felt strangely numb and disagreeable. But he soon satisfied himself that the bullet of his enemy had only grazed the bone, without fracturing it. Although fortunate in escaping serious injury from this volley, Prairie Phil did not care to risk a second one. Without slackening, the pace of Blackbird, the young guide turned in his saddle and fired with quick but unerring precision at the foremost of his foes.

With a wild shout of pain the stricken redskin reeled and fell from his horse, while the latter pranced away with a snort of terror.

Phil reloaded his rifle, his steed still bounding forward in its swift, graceful fashion, which was

rapidly widening the distance from his pursuers.

But the boy realized that this thing could not continue forever. Blackbird had had a long and fatiguing chase already, and his present pace was telling upon his energies. Every nerve was strained to its utmost; he quivered with excitement and fatigue; his sides were reeking with perspiration. The boy felt a keen sense of pity for the noble animal, that strove so hard to save the life of its master. Yet he dared not relinquish his efforts, nor even to slacken his speed.

In a moment his rifle was reloaded, and once more he discharged it at a savage foe. But this time, the distance being greater than before, the shot did not have so fatal an effect. Instead of the redskin being hit, it was the mustang he bestrode that sank beneath the shot, while the savage rider was compelled to leap to the ground, and his comrades sped past him.

So intent was the boy on the pursuing foe, that he did not, for several minutes, note what was before him. At this juncture, however, he became sensible of ascending more than an ordinary roll of the prairie. As he glanced ahead, he was struck with mingled joy and surprise.

The creek, at this point, made an abrupt bend to the south, and a mile or so beyond arose a long line of foot-hills, and beyond these, the blue, rugged Rockies, whose crests seemed to pierce the azure vault of the heavens.

The heart of our hero gave a bound of sudden hope, for he had almost given up all thought of outriding his enemies. If he could only reach those foot-hills, with their wooded nooks and cavernous retreats, he could easily elude his foes.

Before he had come in sight of the creek, he had been riding away from, instead of toward, the mountains, and, therefore, had not, until now, realized their proximity. The fact of their nearness was not a very pleasing one in one particular, however. He had started forth from those very foot-hills nearly three hours ago, his destination being the settlement of Cottonwood Bend.

Therefore, after his long, hard ride, he was now returning to the very point whence he had started, driven thither like a fox to its burrow.

There was little satisfaction in this discouraging reflection, yet he felt a deep sense of thankfulness that hope of escape from his foes still existed. Blackbird had gone almost of his own will, his master taking little heed of his course. So, it seemed almost like a divine interposition that the steed had borne its rider toward a haven of safety.

At this moment a wild chorus of yells arose from the throats of the pursuing Indians, and they lashed their ponies to a renewed spurt of speed. An instant later they fired a volley at the fugitive.

This time the distance was much greater than before, and the rapid motion of their horses rendered their aim almost a random one. None of the shots harmed either Blackbird nor his young master.

But the latter became aware that the pace of his horse was rapidly slackening, and that it must soon cease altogether. Instead of gaining

upon his foes now, he realized that they were gaining with dreadful certainty upon him.

He spoke to the noble animal in encouraging accents, and the latter made a renewed attempt to increase his pace. But the effort lasted but a moment, and then the horse stumbled violently, and came near falling. Phil knew that, if he hoped to save the life of his horse, he would have to dismount and give up the race. At all events, to remain longer upon the back of the steed would not increase his chances of escape, for he could run faster than he was traveling now.

Acting upon this thought, Prairie Phil suddenly leaped to the ground, and ran rapidly toward the fringe of cottonwoods, which intervened between him and the creek. He heard an exultant shout from the savages, but he heeded it not, bent only upon gaining a protective shelter.

Blackbird, freed of his burden, trotted away for a short distance, and then fell to nibbling the sweet prairie grass.

The young guide disliked thus to abandon his horse, for he well knew that the redskins would appropriate it upon the first opportunity. But there was no other alternative, for to fall into their hands himself was equal to sealing his own doom.

Now his foes were gaining upon him with every bound of their mustangs, and in another minute they would be near enough to render their aim almost certain. But at this juncture, Phil found himself entering the belt of timber, and an instant later he was upon the bank of the creek. Here he met with another difficulty, the possibility of which had not until then occurred to him. The channel of the stream was at this point so deep that it would be impossible to descend the bank to ford it. It was likewise too broad to leap across.

Quickly the keen eyes of the boy scanned the locality, in hopes to find some means of crossing the creek. But none presented itself. He heard the shouts of his enemies coming momentarily nearer, and he realized that he had not a moment to lose. He turned quickly, and ran along the bank of the creek, hoping to reach a fordable point. Suddenly he uttered a low exclamation of joy. A few rods distant he beheld the trunk of a fallen tree, lying horizontally across the chasm, which yawned black and deep beneath.

At the same moment he heard his foes entering the belt of cottonwoods several yards above, and nerved by the imminence of his peril, he bounded swiftly toward the impromptu bridge.

CHAPTER II.

OVER THE CREEK.

PRAIRIE PHIL paused upon the brink of the chasm, and glanced somewhat suspiciously at the prostrate cottonwood which spanned it. The tree was not a large one, and its appearance was such that at any other time he would scarce have trusted it to bear his weight.

But there was no alternative now, and so he crawled cautiously out upon it. To his satisfaction, he found it much stronger than it had appeared, for it did not even bend beneath him, as he had expected it would. His hopes arose again, and he crawled rapidly toward the opposite bank of the creek. He had nearly reached his goal, when he was startled and brought to a halt by a slight sound proceeding from the dense clump of shrubbery which concealed the further end of the prostrate tree. He tightly clasped his rifle, and bent his eyes upon the spot in a keen, penetrating scrutiny. All around the trees and undergrowth grew thickly, and a sort of twilight pervaded the place, rendering objects but dimly visible. A soft breeze swept through the interlacing branches with a whispering sound; the water of the creek murmured far below; close in his rear he could hear the crashing of underbrush, indicating the near approach of his pursuers.

For only a moment did he hesitate. Then he moved boldly forward again, eyes and ears alert.

He reached the opposite bank of the creek in safety, and plunged into the thicket whence the suspicious sound had proceeded. There was no sign of a living object there, and the youth concluded that the sound had been made by a squirrel or some other small animal, which had been frightened by his approach.

Acting upon a sudden thought, he turned and attempted to lift the prostrate cottonwood from its resting-place, and thus balk further pursuit from his enemies. But he found the butt of the tree so imbedded in undergrowth, that it was impossible to remove it without spending more time than was prudent. So he abandoned the

attempt, and started at a swift pace through the bushes, taking care to make as little noise as possible.

For several minutes he ran rapidly onward, and then he halted at the foot of a steep, rocky ascent, to take breath and listen for sounds of pursuit. To his surprise, no such sounds came to his ears. Had the Indians failed to discover the fallen tree which had served him to such good purpose?—or had they abandoned the search, believing it to be hopeless, where the fugitive might find so many secure hiding-places? The last was the most probable solution to the problem, and the young guide experienced a sudden sense of security, which seemed almost blissful after the protracted strain which his nerves had suffered.

He sank down upon the rocky earth, and drew a long breath of relief.

For several minutes he remained motionless, regaining new breath and courage from the restful quietude that surrounded him. Yet he did not relax his vigilance, and his rifle was held in readiness for instant use, should occasion require.

At last he arose to his feet, cast a quick, sweeping glance upon all sides, and then walked rapidly up the ascent. The way grew more steep and precipitous at every step, and the timber-growth more sparse and stunted. He was bent upon gaining a place of security, where he might remain until the Indians had abandoned their quest for him, when he could recross the creek and resume his journey to Cottonwood Bend.

For half an hour he toiled up the ascent, and then paused and glanced backward. He found himself upon the summit of a high, rocky hill, beyond which towered the lofty mountains. He was above the tops of the trees which fringed the creek, and beyond them he beheld the undulating surface of the prairie, stretching away to the eastward until it met the blue horizon in the distance. He beheld the mustangs of the Indians feeding quietly, but not a savage was in view.

For some minutes the young guide gazed upon the same; then he was suddenly aroused from his brief reverie by the report of a rifle, ringing out with startling nearness. The echoes lingered upon the air, dying away at last seemingly upon the distant mountain-tops.

Prairie Phil glanced about him quickly, but he saw no sign of the marksman, whoever he might be. He had more than half expected to feel the painful twinge of a bullet, but did not. But from some point beyond the creek, he heard a savage shout, which rent the air with strange distinctness. Then all became deathly silent again, save for the soft murmur of the breeze through the tree tops.

For several minutes the young guide stood with his head bent in a listening attitude, his every sense keenly alert. At length he turned abruptly, and commenced cautiously to descend, retracing his steps toward the creek. He experienced a sudden conviction that there were foes upon this side as well as the other, and that flight in this direction was liable to lead him into an ambush of waiting savages. The band of Indians who first pursued him, he noticed, did not join the others in their pursuit, but directed their course toward a point upon the creek above that at which he had crossed.

Was it not probable, then, that they had also crossed the stream, perhaps before he had done so, for the purpose of cutting off his retreat in that direction? But this explanation did not solve the problem of whom fired the single shot. He could explain that in only one way: that it was a signal from his foes upon this side to those upon the other.

Cautiously our hero descended the slope, pausing at last in a dense thicket a short distance from the creek. The thickly interlacing shrubbery afforded excellent concealment, and as the space around within a radius of several yards was comparatively clear of undergrowth, no enemy could approach unperceived. Here the youth resolved to remain, until reasonably certain that the redskins had abandoned the chase.

Crouching, silent and motionless, in his concealment, the young guide remained until a full hour had elapsed. During the entire period no unusual sound broke upon the stillness.

Unable to curb his impatience longer, the youth arose to his feet and emerged from the thicket, moving with silent, rapid strides toward the creek.

Prairie Phil was keenly disappointed at the delay which had been forced upon him. He had an object in hastening to Cottonwood Bend—an object that lay nearer his heart than all else in the world. The day before he had learned a

piece of intelligence which threatened the happiness and honor of the most beautiful girl in the settlement—Cora Bland. Although our hero was in the habit of spending but little time in the settlements, of late he had visited Cottonwood Bend with increasing frequency. Perhaps he did not quite realize the cause thereof, although there were others who solved the problem quickly enough. He had plenty of friends there, but, for some reason, he found Cora Bland more kindly, and more appreciative of his exploits, than any of the others.

One other little fact will make the whole secret lucid to the reader, if it did not to our hero. Prairie Phil was very miserable whenever he found Wirt Wiley visiting at the Blands'; not because he knew aught against Wirt, for the latter was a comparative stranger at the Bend; but because Cora was so gracious toward him, sometimes almost ignoring the presence of the young guide. And so, as time went on, Phil came to dislike the graceful, mustached Wirt Wiley with all the strength of his nature, and imagined all sorts of things against him. And yesterday, the day previous to that which marks the opening of our story, he had learned, in a rather singular manner, facts which verified his worst suspicions. It was to bear these tidings to Cora Bland that he had started upon that swift ride toward Cottonwood Bend. Hence his intense impatience at the delay, and his imprudence in resuming his journey in the face of so much danger.

As the young guide drew near the bank of the creek, he proceeded very cautiously, his senses keenly alert, and his rifle tightly clasped in his small, strong hands. As he entered the denser timber-growth, he found it much darker than it had been before. He realized, from this fact, that the sun had sunk behind the mountains, and that nightfall was approaching.

He passed through the belt of timber, and saw the deep channel of the creek yawning close at hand. A short distance above, he beheld the prostrate cottonwood which had served him as a bridge two hours before, and toward this he made his way. He reached it, and clasping his rifle tightly in one hand, he commenced crawling out upon it. He had proceeded scarce the length of his own body, when he felt a perceptible jar of the trunk, which brought him abruptly to a halt.

He raised his eyes; a cry of mingled horror and amazement escaped his lips.

He found himself gazing into the dusky, hideous face of an Indian warrior, who had commenced to cross the chasm from the opposite side! For a moment the two glared upon each other without stirring a muscle.

Not a sound broke the stillness, save the murmuring of the water below, and the rustling of the foliage above.

Prairie Phil clasped his rifle more tightly, but from his insecure position he dared not attempt to use it. Like a flash a dozen schemes went through his brain, and it was evident that the redskin was likewise revolving plans for the annihilation of his enemy.

Never before had our hero found himself in so perilous a situation, for he stood in almost as much danger from being precipitated into the chasm, as from his savage foe.

He quickly comprehended the impossibility of using his rifle in such close quarters, and in the hand-to-hand conflict, which seemed imminent, he would be certain of dropping it into the creek. So, acting upon a sudden impulse, he gave it a backward toss, landing it safely amid the shrubbery. This action seemed to awaken the redskin to activity, and the next instant he began crawling rapidly toward our hero, one hand clasping his gleaming knife, his dark orbs scintillating, his ugly countenance expressing the savage passions of his race.

Prairie Phil grasped his own knife, and waited with quiet coolness the attack of his foe. He noted the gigantic proportions of the latter, the brawny, red arms, with their knotted muscles, the easy, agile movements of the body, and realized that he had an adversary for whom he was no match.

Only a moment did he have to wait for the attack. Then knife met knife with a singing clash, that seemed to send a thousand sparks from their glittering blades.

Faster and fiercer came the blows, and each of the combatants exerted his skill to his utmost to disarm the other.

The youth was conscious of the greater strength of his enemy, but in point of skill in parrying and dealing thrusts, the young guide soon proved himself the superior.

After two or three minutes of rapid striking, Phil succeeded in hitting the wrist of his antago-

nist, and by an adroit movement sent the weapon of the redskin spinning out into the creek. But the advantage thus gained was only momentary, for the savage attempted to close with him, and thus make it impossible for him to use his knife. Now, for the first time, our hero realized that the slight bullet-wound he had received in his left arm had weakened that member.

Before he could deal a blow with the knife, the savage had seized the wrist of his uninjured arm, and by a quick, adroit maneuver sent the weapon from his hand into the depths of the creek. The next instant Prairie Phil found himself in the vise-like embrace of his adversary, who exerted every energy to hurl him from his seat.

The youth locked his limbs around the cottonwood, and struggled with a desperation that he had never felt before. For a brief moment the two swayed to and fro; then the youth was suddenly forced sideways, and lost his balance. The next instant both combatants were hanging heads downward, and oscillating in each other's embrace like a giant pendulum.

CHAPTER III.

OF THE CREEK.

"FATHER, how shall I answer Wirt Wiley to-day? I must decide within an hour, and—oh, if he had only been content to let our friendship go on as it has done for the last three or four months, instead of asking so much of me. I like Wirt, but I don't want to marry anybody for a good while yet."

The speaker was a fair-faced, golden-haired and blue-eyed maiden, whose age might have been only fifteen, so far as personal appearance was concerned, instead of eighteen as it really was. She was standing in the doorway of a small, comfortable cabin, built of cottonwood logs, and fronting toward a narrow, swift-running creek. Near her stood a stalwart, brown-faced man, with long hair and beard streaked with grey, and dark, expressive eyes which might look angry or kindly as their owner willed.

This was the cabin of Reuben Bland; and all around were signs of pioneer thrift and energy. The cabin stood upon the outskirts of the settlement, and the nearest neighbor was a quarter of a mile distant. Away to the westward stretched the rolling, unbroken prairie-land, while to the northwest arose the rugged line of mountains, their blue crests seemingly piled one upon another until they were blended with the azure sky.

"Wirt wants you to marry him, eh?" exclaimed the man, in his gruff, abrupt tones.

The girl's face took on a flood of color, and she affected a laugh to hide her embarrassment.

"Yes; you know I told you what he said to me last week when he was here. And I promised to give him my answer to-day. Now, tell me what to do?"

She looked very grave as she said that. Her father glanced at her face furtively.

"If you don't know your own heart, then I can't advise, Cora. I don't know quite what to make out of Wirt Wiley. He appears like an honest fellow enough, but you don't know much about him, for all that."

Cora Bland faced her companion with a flash of indignation in her blue eyes.

"You do not doubt his honesty, father?" she exclaimed, quickly.

"I neither doubt him nor would I trust him implicitly without knowing more of him. If you love him, he will have to prove himself worthy of you; if you are indifferent, I shall not take the trouble to inquire into his character."

The man spoke with quiet firmness. His tone only increased the indignation of Cora.

"I know Wirt is honest, father, and I wouldn't insult him by questioning him in that way. But I don't wish to marry him, or anyone, now. If I could love anybody, I think it would be Wirt."

"And how about Prairie Phil, Cora?" he questioned, with another furtive look.

She laughed outright, with no sign of embarrassment, as she replied:

"Oh, Phil Harrison is a brave boy, and I like him to play with very much. But I should as soon think of loving a ten-year old, in the sense that you mean. We are brother and sister, and excellent friends, that is all, and he knows it."

She spoke carelessly, but her father looked troubled. He was about to say something more when an exclamation escaped the lips of Cora, and she pointed to the creek. He beheld a canoe with a single occupant skimming the surface of the stream with bird-like swiftness, which soon brought it opposite the cabin. There its prow

struck the bank, and Wirt Wiley leaped lightly out. The next instant he was shaking hands in his easy, cordial fashion, with the pioneer, and then he turned to Cora.

Wirt was a tall, gracefully-built fellow, with a gentlemanly bearing that distinguished him from the ordinary class of bordermen, and indicated that his life had not always been spent in that primitive locality. His face was dark and singularly handsome, but its expression would have been a difficult one for a physiognomist to read.

"A delightful morning for a canoe-ride?" he exclaimed, in his musical tones, looking down into her face with a gaze of undisguised admiration.

She blushed deeply, and glanced half-questioningly at her father.

"Go, if you wish to," said the latter, comprehending her silent question. Without further hesitation, she entered the cabin, soon returning equipped for the excursion. A minute later the twain were seated in the tiny craft, in which they had spent many a happy hour together. With strong, practiced strokes, the young man sent the canoe up the creek, keeping close to the bank to avoid the resistance of the current. For several minutes a continued silence fell between them. Wirt was the first to break it. He had been furtively watching the grave, half-troubled expression of her face all the while.

"You have not forgotten my request made upon my last visit to your house, and by this time you must have made a decision. Please don't disappoint me now, Cora."

He spoke half-pleadingly, and there was a musical tenderness in his voice that thrilled her strangely. Yet, at the very moment when she was most tempted to make a favorable answer, an undefinable repugnance sprang up in her heart, and she shivered unvoluntarily. She felt his gaze bent upon her face with passionate intensity, and she experienced a sudden sense of terror, as though she had unexpectedly found herself in the presence of some wild animal. By an effort, she aroused herself from the fascinated spell which had fallen upon her, and permitted her eyes to meet those of her companion. She saw nothing repulsive nor terrifying there, yet she could not wholly banish her sense of vague fear.

"I haven't forgotten your request, Wirt," she said, her voice sounding strangely unnatural to her own ears. "But I cannot give you an answer just yet. I like you, and I would dislike to give up your friendship. But I would not marry the best man in the world without plenty of time to think of the matter. We are scarcely acquainted with each other yet, and I am only a little girl. Let us keep on as friends, and wait for something better when I am old enough to know my heart."

Wirt Wiley had laid down his paddle, and the canoe drifted close to the shore, pausing in the midst of a clump of overhanging shrubbery. He bent forward and seized her hand eagerly.

"Then you cannot say that you love me—even that you like me better than any one else?" he exclaimed, in his low, intense tones.

"I shall say nothing that I am not sure of, or that I shall ever wish to take back," she answered, firmly.

He remained silent for several minutes, his dark eyes fixed absently upon a point some distance up the creek.

"I believe you care more for that young daredevil, Phil Harrison!" he exclaimed at last, with a flash of anger.

The girl snatched away her hand with resentful quickness, and her blue eyes met his black ones with a half-defiant expression.

"Prairie Phil is a brave, true-hearted boy, and I like him, and shall not listen to ill against him. If you talk in that way, I shall like him better than you, in spite of myself," she returned.

He picked up the idle paddle and dipped it in the waters of the creek, sending the small craft swiftly up stream.

"I didn't mean to say that, Cora," he said, as he bent vigorously to his task once more. "Phil is a good fellow, no doubt, and it was only a jealous impulse that caused my remark. Forgive me, won't you?"

"Yes, for I cannot harbor malice. But had we not better return? We are more than two miles from home, and it will soon be dinner-time. Mother is ill, you know, and I have to do the work."

As she said this they rounded an abrupt bend in the stream. It was very narrow at that point, and the trees lining its banks formed an arched bower above their heads. In silence Wirt Wiley ceased his efforts, and the craft

commenced drifting with the current. Its prow suddenly turned shoreward, and the next instant it struck the bank with a shock. The two inmates uttered simultaneous cries of astonishment, and the young man again dipped his paddle, to force the canoe back into the middle of the creek. As he did so, it was suddenly wrenched from his grasp, and before he could recover from his surprise, he beheld a tufted, shaven head arise close to the craft, while a brawny red hand seized him by the arm, and by a powerful movement drew him from his position, overturning the canoe. The next instant a wild scream of horror burst from the lips of Cora Bland, and she seized frantically upon the overhanging shrubbery. In a moment she had obtained a foot-hold upon the bank, and turned to look after her companion. She beheld two forms splashing desperately in the water, dashing it into a foaming mass. She realized that Wirt Wiley was engaged in a hand-to-hand combat with the Indian, and she sank down, all dripping wet, overcome with the horror and helplessness of her situation.

At that moment she heard a loud crashing of the underbrush close at hand; she raised her head with a new sense of terror; she uttered a wild cry that echoed weirdly through the belt of forest, penetrating even to the open prairie. Close by her side she beheld the painted, hideous face of an Indian, his small, bead-like eyes gleaming triumphantly, his thick lips spread with a grin of exultation. Like a frightened fawn, the girl sprang to her feet and bounded from the spot. But she had not gone a dozen yards before she found her way disputed by another bulky, savage form. Before she could turn, two brawny, scarred arms seized about her, and she was raised from the ground with as much ease as though she were an infant. Again she gave utterance to a piercing cry for help; but before she could repeat it, one hand of her captor was pressed tightly upon her mouth, foiling her attempt. Then she closed her eyes, overcome by a sudden sense of faintness. She was conscious of being borne swiftly through the forest; of emerging into the sunlight of the open prairie; of hearing guttural, indistinguishable utterances around her. Then all became suddenly dark, and she was conscious of nothing more.

The time that ensued was all a blank to her, for her sudden, intense terror and the realization of her captivity combined to give her a shock which her senses could not withstand. When she awoke to consciousness, she found herself lying bound and helpless, surrounded by rocks and stunted trees. At first she saw no living object, but a second glance revealed a tall, statuesque figure standing in the center of the enclosure, which unmistakably belonged to an Indian. Slowly the recollection of the events of the last few hours returned to her, and she closed her eyes again, an earnest prayer for succor going up from her heart. For several minutes she lay thus, surrounded by a death-like silence. She was suddenly aroused by the near report of a rifle, whose echoes lingered on the air for several seconds. She saw the tall, savage sentinel start, glance hastily about him, and then come toward her, his gaze bent keenly upon her. She remained perfectly motionless, for she knew that he had not seen her open her eyes, and therefore thought her still unconscious. For a full minute he watched her countenance, and then he turned and strode from the opening, disappearing amid the surrounding bushes. Then Cora ventured to open her eyes once more, and raising her head she took a hasty survey of the place.

There was no living object within range of her vision, and a singular silence reigned. Had her captors left her thus, trusting to the security of her bonds to keep her there? And if such was the case, whither had they gone? As she asked these mental questions, her mind reverted to the moment of her capture, and to Wirt Wiley, whom she had last seen struggling with an Indian in the waters of the creek. Had he perished in that struggle? His antagonist had friends near, and was it not more than probable that the young man had been overpowered by numbers? The girl shuddered at the thought, and she experienced a sense of regret that she had not told him that he might hope for her love. For, now that the thought of his being dead came to her, she realized that she had cared for him more than she knew. While she was pondering upon this, she was startled by the sound of a stealthy footstep close in her rear. Turning her head quickly, she scarce repressed an exclamation of intense amazement at what she saw!

CHAPTER IV.

AN ECCENTRIC INDIVIDUAL.

A TALL, giant figure had stepped from behind a huge boulder, and stood motionless in a stooping attitude a couple of paces distant.

At first, from his uncouth, dirt-grimed garb, she thought the figure was that of an Indian warrior. But a second glance showed her mistake. The face of the stranger, or the small portion of it which was not concealed by a thick growth of sandy-brown beard, was unmistakably white. His hands, large, brown and muscular, were clasped over the muzzle of a long, shining rifle; at his girdle was a brace of heavy revolvers, and a long hunting-knife in a sheath. He was clad in buckskin from head to foot, and upon the latter were a pair of well-worn moccasins of gigantic proportions.

If erect, the stranger would have measured fully six feet and seven; and the proportions of his body conformed with his height.

Of his countenance, as we have said, very little was visible, on account of the heavy growth of whiskers. His eyes, shaded by shaggy, grey brows, were a marked feature, being very small, but so keen and piercing that their glance seemed almost magnetic in its power.

For a minute the giant gazed into the wonder-struck countenance of Cora Bland. Then he straightened his figure, as though to impress her more strongly with its prodigious height, and stepped with singular lightness toward her.

Before she had time to realize his intentions, he had severed her bonds, and raised her as he would an infant in his strong arms. The next instant he had borne her from the opening, and after several minutes rapid walking, he paused at what appeared to be the entrance of a small cavern. Here he carefully placed her upon her feet.

Thus far not a word had been uttered upon either side. But now the giant spoke, his voice seeming to come from the depths of his massive chest:

"You're out'n thet tangle, miss, an' you may thank the Lord for't, an' not me!"

She drew a long breath of relief.

"I shall not fail to thank both, I hope," she returned, a sudden sense of security coming to her.

"That'll do, miss. I was an instrument in the Lord's hands—that's all. You was in a very p'icular pre-dicament, and 'twas sort of cur'us thet I kem upon you jest as I did. I've been dodgin' redskins all day, and I've plugged nigh onto a dozen of 'em with lead from the intarnal corp'rosity of old Pizen, which is my rifle. Alus makes 'em sick, it does. Disturbs the capillary circulatin' functions, my uncle would tell you—my uncle was a doctor, understand. S'pose you know who's talkin' to you?"

The last was said in a tone of inquiry. The girl smiled.

"No, I never saw you before that I remember," she answered.

The stranger's bearded lips parted in a good-humored grin.

"Then you never seed me at all? 'Cause if you had, you would have remembered the 'casion long as you lived. It must be we never got very nigh each other afore, for I'm visible to the naked eye as far as you can see a streak of light-enin'. People as meet me face to face, can't help seein' me, though my father used to say he had to look seven separate, individual times to make sure of seein' my whole length. Sile was toler'ble rich whar I was growed, and I was the biggest 'tater in the hill, so to speak. But I begun to use terbacker pretty young, and I 'spect that sort of stunted my growth. Bad, wa'n't it, miss?"

The giant was resting upon his long rifle again, in that unconcerned attitude in which she had first seen him, with his small, piercing eyes fixed upon her face.

Acting upon a sudden impulse, she drew close to his side, and placed one hand confidently upon his arm.

"I don't know who you are, but I am sure you will not forsake me now that you have done so much. My name is Cora Bland, and I live upon the outskirts of the settlement of Cottonwood Bend. I was captured while in a canoe upon the creek with a friend. I expect my companion was killed, for I left him struggling with a savage in the water. If you will only take me back to my home in safety, I will do anything in the world to reward you. Oh, I was so terrified when I found myself helpless in the hands of the Indians. I fear I could never have escaped alive had you not come to my rescue."

"Polecats and weasels, gal, I didn't do nuthin'. I jest sorter picked ye up when ye was ly-

in' thar sort o' forsooken. If I hadn't been nigh, the Lord would have sent somebody else. He allus sends someone to help sich pure, helpless critters as you when they're in a tarnal tangle. But I hev'n't told ye who I be yet. You oughter be more cur'us; most women air. Up on the Platte, whar I've trapped every winter and fall for fifteen years, they call me Nick Wharton—that is, human white folks call me that. The redskins called me the Panther. I s'pose they give me that title 'cause me an' old Pizen used to light on 'em when we wa'n't expected, a good many times. Neither Pizen nor I are complete without t'other. But together we make ha'r an' hide fly sometimes."

The giant scout patted his weapon as though it were a thing possessed of animal intelligence. His companion regarded him with a mingled expression of wonder and amusement upon her face. She was about to reply to his last remark, when a warning "'sh!" from her companion, caused her to keep silent. Her face paled again, and she shrank yet closer to her protector.

No unusual sound had been audible to her ears, but Nick Wharton bent his head in a listening attitude.

Suddenly he stooped until his lips were upon a level with her ears, and whispered:

"Your flight has been diskivered, and the red varmints are makin' a silent hunt for you. Jest crawl in hyar and keep quiet for awhile, and I'll lead 'em on a wild-goose chase."

As he said this the eccentric trapper pointed toward the small cavern before mentioned. Cora shuddered with vague terror at the thought of entering the place alone, but as she hesitated Nick whispered, assuringly:

"I won't go very far, miss, and I'll let you hear old Pizen yelp now and then, jest to keep you comp'ny. And every time he yelps you'll know thar's 'nother sick Injin!"

He stooped, and, taking the hand of his companion, led her into the gloom of the cavern, which was so low and narrow at the entrance that it was with difficulty that the giant could enter at all.

The earth was covered by a soft layer of leaves, blown thither by the autumn winds, and upon these the girl seated herself, facing the entrance of her retreat.

Nick turned and went forth into the light, moving away from the spot with long, rapid strides.

Breathlessly the girl sat and waited, listening intently, yet hearing only the sounds of her own loudly-beating heart. Slowly the minutes passed away. Once she heard a distant shout, coming unmistakably from a savage throat. And at last she heard a loud, heavy report, followed by a prolonged wail of human agony, that caused her to shiver with horror.

Several minutes of death-like silence ensued.

Then there was another loud report, sounding much louder than before; a second yell of pain, then a rush of rapid footsteps coming toward the cavern.

Cora shrank back appalled. She saw a giant figure dash past the opening, and an instant later a dozen dusky forms sped past in swift pursuit. The sounds grew more and more distant, and soon died away altogether.

Once more our heroine breathed freely, feeling a sense of security which she had not before experienced. Yet she felt very lonely, and as she thought of the probable fate of Wirt Wiley she could not repress a flood of tears. She had liked Wirt very much, and now she realized the extent of her attachment.

But her weeping was soon interrupted in a startling manner. A slight, stealthy sound came to her ears, seeming to come from some point within the cave. Again she suppressed her breathing; again her heart throbbed tumultuously with apprehension.

Had the cavern another occupant besides herself? The trapper would not have left her there unless he had known the retreat to be a safe one, for already she felt boundless confidence in Nick Wharton. No doubt he had explored the place before he had brought her thither. Perhaps she had imagined the sound; or possibly a sudden current of air had rustled the dry leaves lying upon the ground.

These thoughts reassured her somewhat, but she still listened intently for a repetition of the sounds.

To her horror she heard a second stealthy sound, and this time there was no possibility of its being caused by a current of air. Something or someone was crawling slowly toward her from a point deeper within the cavern.

She was almost paralyzed with an overwhelming sense of terror, and she had not the power to move from her position had she wished to do so.

All about her intense, impenetrable darkness prevailed. The light from without penetrated only a little way, for the entrance was much narrower than the interior of the cavern.

Nearer and nearer came the sounds. There was no mistaking the presence of some living thing now. Faint and sick with the intensity of her horror, Cora at last changed her position slightly, and, impelled by an irresistible impulse, glanced backward into the chaos of the cavern. She almost uttered a scream of fright at what she saw. Trembling violently, she shrank close to the earth, yet unable to remove her gaze from the terrifying object. Two small, intensely bright spots held her gaze, with a dreadful, resistless fascination. They seemed reared about a foot from the ground, were very close together, and glowed like twin balls of fire in the intense darkness surrounding them. Vaguely the girl realized their nature; and the realization rendered her incapable of motion, or the power to cry out. For several minutes—long—long minutes to our heroine, in her breathless suspense—the glowing points remained perfectly motionless. The crawling sound had also ceased, and only her own heart beats were audible.

To her it seemed that an age had elapsed since she had first heard those sounds. She half-wished they would commence again, for almost anything would be welcome that might break the horrible spell.

She opened her lips and attempted to utter a cry for help. She did not pause to think of the consequences, should her shout reach the ears of her late captors. But her attempt was in vain. Only a husky, whispering sound came from her throat, and that served to arouse those glowing orbs to renewed motion. They seemed suddenly to oscillate to and fro, up and down, with a strangely rhythmic motion, which produced, seemingly, a corresponding swaying of the girl's senses. It seemed to her that her own head was really in motion; that her body, even, was swinging to and fro with resistless power and regularity.

Then the rustling sound was resumed, and the strange object drew nearer. Still she kept her eyes riveted upon it with horrible persistency. In her ears there was a throbbing, drum-like sound, which gradually changed to a sort of pulsating, musical ringing, keeping time with that ceaseless motion of her head.

Now she had no realization of time, and her sense of terror seemed to fade away, and the small, shining points of light appeared to increase in size, and take on hues of changing variety. But at this moment a rude shock came to her trance-like condition; a loud crash sounded in her ears, as though the massive rocks above had split in twain. Then the points of light disappeared, the rhythmic motion and music ceased—then all became a blank!

CHAPTER V.

"TARNAL TANGLES."

"Don't shiver, gal; 'tain't cold, and you're safe enough now. I found you in a 'tarnal tangle, though, and a little more'n you'd been an angel, instid of a substantial, flesh-and-bone female woman, like you air at this minute. You was charmed by a sarpint, or so nigh it thet thar wan't no fun in it. But old Pizen fixed the critter, same as it does human sarpints when it gets a chance. Don't you know me, gal? I'm Nick Wharton, an' I'm a-speakin' to you! It was Pizen as spoke a minute ago, an' it saved your life."

Vaguely, as though from a great distance, the above words sounded in the ears of Cora Bland. And very slowly her consciousness returned to her, and she looked up into the great, kindly face of the old trapper. She found herself lying near the mouth of the little cavern, and the recollection of her late horror returned to her all in a moment. Her strength and courage came back also, and she drew herself to a sitting posture.

"It was the report of your rifle that I heard, then!" she exclaimed, the color returning to her cheeks. "It sounded terribly loud and odd to me; and it seemed as though the shock stunned me."

"I reckon you didn't realize much about that time, miss, and when old Pizen spoke, his voice didn't sound nateral to you. It allus speaks up as though it meant business, and it allus does. I come at about the right time, and the Lord must have sent me, as he has once afore to-day. The sarpint would have struck in another minute, and then whar'd you be now? I led the red varmints a good chase, got 'em off my track,

and returned to see how you was gettin' on. When I come to the entrance of the cave, I spoke, so's not to skeer ye, but ye didn't answer. Then I see the eyes of the reptile, and let Pizen have his way. That 'ar snake isn't of much account, as a snake, just now. I reckon he sent the ball in at the varmint's mouth, and out at the tip of his tail, leavin' nothin' in the world but the skin. That's the way Pizen does it."

Nick Wharton chuckled good-humoredly as he said this, patting his weapon affectionately.

"I did not know what the object was when I first noticed the glowing eyes. But I soon suspected the truth; yet I couldn't stir hand nor foot, nor even cry out. I never felt so strange before—I was dreadfully terrified," said Cora, shuddering.

"You was charmed, that was all. I had been in the cave afore I sent you in thar, and thought it was all safe and right. The varmint must have crawled from some crevice in the rocks. At any rate, it come nigh endin' up your career hyarabouts. But it won't do for us to waste time talkin'. The 'tarnal red imps'll be back looking for us in a little while, and when they're hyar, we want to be whar they isn't, so to speak. Kin you walk, think?"

As he spoke, the scout assisted her to her feet. She found her strength rapidly returning, and answered in the affirmative. Without further remark the giant trapper seized her hand and started at a rapid pace over the uneven, rocky surface. For several minutes they walked on in silence.

Presently Nick came suddenly to a pause. They had entered upon a sort of rocky plateau, which ended in an abrupt, precipitous descent. Here and there a stunted tree or shrub had found root in the scanty soil, but altogether the locality was comparatively destitute of vegetation.

"We can't go much further in this direction, I reckon," exclaimed the trapper, in a cautious tone. "An', what's more, I don't fancy exposin' my carkiss quite so prominently as I be at this minute. It makes me feel sort o' crawly 'long my spinal column, so to speak. We'll hev to go back a piece, an' try an' make a circuit of this p'int."

He wheeled abruptly, and the twain retraced their steps until once more within the shelter of the sparse timber. Starting off in a new direction, they soon found themselves again brought to a stand-still at the brink of a yawning chasm, which it would have been impossible to cross.

The scout uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"I was a 'tarnal polecat that I didn't go a way I was sure of. But I reckoned we could keep out'n the way of the red varmints better by goin' a new way. It's too pesky bad, anyhow. An' night's comin' on in the bargain. Heavens, gall we're in for a 'tarnal tangle now, sure 'nough!"

As he spoke, the trapper seized the arm of his companion and drew her hastily behind a ponderous boulder, which was poised close to the brink of the chasm.

Scarcely had the change in their positions been effected, when a tall, painted Indian warrior emerged from the timber, and came straight toward them.

It could not be that the savage knew of the proximity of our friends, or he would have advanced with more caution. He approached to within a dozen yards of their concealment, where he paused and bent his head in a listening attitude.

For a moment he stood thus, then he walked boldly toward the boulder again.

Nick Wharton raised his rifle quickly to his shoulder, but lowered it without firing.

Resting the weapon against a rock, he quickly drew his knife from its sheath, and awaited the approach of the unsuspecting savage.

In a moment he was close enough for his purpose.

The next instant the giant leaped noiselessly from his concealment, and seized the redskin by the throat, bearing him back toward the brink of the chasm. At the same instant he plunged the long weapon to the hilt in the naked breast of his foe. There was a low, gurgling cry of death-agony, and the victim fell backward, his body disappearing over the brink.

Cora Bland beheld the enactment of the whole brief tragedy, which occupied less time than that required for us to describe it; she shuddered with a sense of sudden horror, and covered her face with her hands, as though to hide the remembrance of the dreadful spectacle; for, though she was a true pioneer daughter, she had never before been called to witness scenes of bloodshed.

She heard her protector returning, but as she glanced toward him, she was surprised to see

him pause suddenly, and then run hastily in an opposite direction, quickly disappearing among the stunted trees. A moment later she comprehended the reason of his singular maneuver.

From the point whence the first Indian had emerged, a dozen dusky figures appeared, and all save two dashed after the scout with fierce, blood-curdling yells.

It was plain to Cora that the trapper had fled away from instead of toward her concealment, for the purpose of drawing the Indians away from her proximity.

His trusty rifle still rested against the boulder within easy reach of her outstretched arm. Involuntarily she placed one hand upon the weapon, as though its presence afforded her a sense of security. The two warriors who did not join in the pursuit of the trapper, stood for several minutes, evidently waiting for some signal.

As Nick Wharton had observed, the day was drawing to a close. Twilight had fallen, and was rapidly deepening into night.

Objects assumed a dim, indistinct appearance, and to the eyes of Cora Bland, all the trees and rocks seemed possessed of human form and life; the former beckoning to each other in the gloom, and the latter reared like grim sentinels upon every side. The soft west wind swept through the tree-tops with a mournful sound; far away upon the mountains and prairie sounded the bark of a coyote, and occasional prolonged howls of a wolf.

Minutes passed, slowly and wearily to the solitary girl crouching there, watching and listening in breathless suspense. She kept her gaze riveted upon the two statuesque forms of the waiting savages. Suddenly she beheld one of them turn and come boldly toward her concealment with swift strides.

Her first impulse was to seize the rifle and discharge it at her foe. But a second thought convinced her that by so doing she would betray her concealment to the remaining redskins, while she would be left utterly without means of defense. So she crouched silent and motionless close to the giant boulder, hoping and praying in her heart that the savage would not find her hiding-place.

The Indian passed between the rock and the brink of the chasm, and paused close to the latter, with his back toward the trembling girl.

She could have touched him with her outstretched hand, and should he chance to turn he would be certain to discover her. A sudden powerful impulse came to her as she looked upon her silent, unsuspecting enemy—an impulse to send him over the brink upon which he was standing.

She realized that it lay in her power to do this, even with her feeble strength. And as the thought flashed upon her, she seemed suddenly endowed with strength and courage to execute her scheme. Silently rising to her feet, she quickly flung out both hands against the back of the redskin, exerting her strength to its utmost in the frantic effort. So sudden and violent was her movement that the savage could have no time to brace himself for the shock, nor seize upon any object with his hands. He was standing so close to the yawning chasm that the impetus sent him far out over its black depths. A wild wail of mortal terror rang out from the lips of the doomed wretch, and he fell down—down, striking with a dull, sickening thud upon the rocks below!

The girl shrank back, faint and horror-struck at her own act. At the same moment the remaining Indian uttered a shout of dismay, and dashed toward her place of concealment with swift bounds. She saw him coming; realized that in another moment she would be in his power. Now, then, was the moment for her to use the weapon so providentially left by the trapper. Nerved by desperation, all thought of fear vanished, and she grasped the rifle, and set the trigger. It was all she could do to lift the ponderous weapon which the giant trapper handled so easily. But necessity lent her additional strength, and she brought the muzzle to bear upon the approaching redskin and fired.

The report rang on the air with startling sharpness, and was echoed back from the rocks, and trees upon the mountain sides, mingling with the wild cry of the stricken savage.

With wildly beating heart, Cora Bland bent forward to see if her shot had been fatal. She saw the Indian spring into the air; heard his yell of agony; saw him sink down upon the rocks in a quivering heap.

Hasty and unpracticed as her aim had been, the bullet had done its work as effectually as though directed by the unerring eye of the giant trapper.

Cora replaced the weapon against the boulder,

and crouched down once more panting with excitement and her exertion.

All was deathly silent once more, save for the soft sounds of the wind as it swept among the rocks and shrubbery. For several minutes she remained in that crouching position, regaining her strength and courage, both of which had just received such a severe test.

So rapidly had the events of the last half hour succeeded each other, that she scarcely had time to realize her peril, or the necessity for her own prompt action in her defense. She had just sent two human souls into eternity—an act that she would never have thought herself capable of had she not been put to the test. Now the remembrance of her own acts filled her heart with a sickening horror that came near depriving her of consciousness.

At last she began to wonder at the non-appearance of the giant trapper. Had he been overtaken by his pursuers, and, being without his rifle in which he placed such confidence, been killed or captured? As this possibility flashed through her brain, she heard several sharp, quick reports, following each other in rapid succession. Then all became silent once more.

Breathlessly the girl crouched close to the boulder, and waited and listened for she knew not what.

CHAPTER VI.

WIRT WILEY AGAIN.

THE darkness had fallen very quickly, and objects had grown so indistinct that it was hard to distinguish the animate from the inanimate.

At length Cora Bland was aroused to renewed vigilance by light, stealthy footsteps, approaching apparently from a point in the rear. She turned quickly; she beheld a tall, slender figure coming noiselessly toward her.

Did her eyes deceive her, or was there a familiarity of movement about the approaching stranger? Nearer he drew, pausing at last almost within reach of her arm. Yet he did not appear to see her, his gaze being bent upon a point across the gully. She raised her hand to her eyes, as though to satisfy herself that it was no phantasy of vision which she beheld. Then a low, glad cry escaped her lips, and she arose to her feet trembling with joy.

The man turned and gave utterance to an exclamation of mingled surprise and delight.

"You here and alone, Cora? And I have been searching for you since the moment we were so rudely separated at the creek. I'm very glad you are unharmed."

Wirt Wiley, for it was he beyond a doubt, seized both her hands and bent a keen, impulsive glance down into her eyes.

"Oh, Wirt, I feared that you were killed. I left you struggling in the creek with an Indian warrior," she exclaimed, in a tone of relief.

"And were you sorry when you expected never to see me alive again?" asked the young man, in a low tone.

"Sorry? How could I help feeling sorry? I like you and I have never denied it. And now I am very glad you escaped, and that you are here. Did you kill your adversary?"

"I got free from his clutches and made a run for it, for I found I was no match for him in point of physical strength. And how did you escape?"

"Through the help of the oddest, bravest man you ever saw. Nick Wharton, he calls himself. He is a veritable giant in size and strength, but as kind and tender as a woman. He left me a little while ago to lead away a party of savages who had got upon our trail. I expect him to return every moment. I heard shots a few minutes ago, and I think he must have been firing his revolver, for his rifle is here."

"Nick Wharton!" repeated the young man, in an odd tone. "I have heard of him before, but I supposed he was up on the Platte. There his head-quarters used to be. So he is around here. But we must not tarry in this place, Cora. There is a huge party of Indians and half-breeds encamped a half mile below this point, and small parties are out in every direction. I am acquainted with this locality, and can guide you safely back to the settlement in a short time."

"And would you have me desert my friend without leaving him assurance of my safety?" she asked, in surprise.

The young man made an impatient gesture. "He can satisfy himself by signs that you have gone away with a white man instead of an Indian. You can't fool Nick Wharton, I assure you, nor even place him in doubt where a clew can be obtained by any living man. But we cannot remain here and run the chance of falling

into the hands of the foe again. Come—there's no time to lose."

He spoke a trifle authoritatively this time, and seized the hand of his companion. At that instant a savage shout rang on the air, proceeding from a near point. She hesitated no longer, but followed the young man over the rough, rocky surface at a rapid pace. For several minutes they kept on, and at last they halted in a thick clump of timber.

"Do you think we are followed?" the girl asked, in a cautious whisper.

"I hope not. It is too dark for them to follow a trail so indistinct as ours must be upon this hard, rocky land. But you must be greatly fatigued by this time, Cora, and hungry, too. Fortunately, I am provided with a supply of pemmican, without which I never start forth upon a journey. It is rather dry food, but much better than none when one is unable to cook fresh meat. Perhaps we can remain here long enough for you to refresh yourself."

As he spoke, the young man produced a pouch well-filled with dried meat, and proffered it to his companion.

Now that she was becoming somewhat accustomed to her perilous position, she realized that she really stood in need of food. So she partook of the proffered meat with keen relish.

While thus engaged her companion left her for a brief period, soon returning with a small tin cup filled with water.

This was more welcome even than the meat, and the girl took a long, refreshing draught.

When she had finished her repast, Wirt said:

"We are several miles distant from the settlement, and if you are not too fatigued to do so, it will be best for us to be making most of the time we have before light, for in the daytime our enemies can follow our trail with utmost certainty."

"I am strong enough to walk a long way now," Cora returned, cheerfully.

Wirt Wiley made no further remark, but taking her hand in his firm, reassuring clasp, he led the way from the thick clump of timber out into a more open space.

They had proceeded scarcely twenty yards when the young man suddenly halted with a warning gesture.

They heard the sound of stealthy footsteps close in their rear.

Wirt turned quickly, drawing a revolver from his belt. They beheld a gigantic figure emerge from the timber, and come toward them with lengthy strides.

Wiley raised the weapon, and would have fired directly at the breast of the approaching man, had not his companion caught his arm with a quick, nervous clasp.

The sharp report of the weapon rang on the air, but the bullet sped wide of its mark—thanks to the restraining hand of Cora.

"It is Nick Wharton, Wirt!"

The next moment the giant-trapper confronted them, and one great brawny hand was placed with crushing force upon the shoulder of Wirt Wiley.

"Would you shoot a friend as you would a foe, youngster? It's keerless for a boy to hev' a pistil, unless he kin judge better when to use it. I wouldn't trust myself with such a ornary wild-cat, miss, if I war you. He can't tell a red-skin from a white un' at ten paces!"

There was a ring of menacing earnestness in the low, thunderous tones of the scout, and his small eyes blazed with suppressed anger.

Wirt Wiley stepped backward with a defiant movement.

"How did I know that you were a friend? I was expecting foes, and acted accordingly. I should do the same again, under like circumstances," he exclaimed.

"You would, eh? An' that's the inducement you throw out fur friends to come to your assistance? Reckon I'd better teach you a little lesson; it would l'arn ye to be less impudent, anyhow."

As he said this the giant clutched the young man, and shook him fiercely. Cora uttered a low cry of horror.

"Stop—stop! In Heaven's name, do not kill him. It is Wirt Wiley, and he is my friend!"

She seized the arm of the giant, and strove to restrain him. He stopped almost instantly in answer to her appeal.

"Whatever his name might be, he can't try his pop-guns on me, not by a 'tarnal sight. I don't 'low that sort o' thing from either red-skin or white-skin. So this is the one as was with you in the canoe when you was captured? Has crazy spells, don't he? Acted loony jest now. My uncle the doctor would recommend him to an asylum, and put him into a straight-jacket. He isn't safe to be 'round loose, if he

shoots at everybody he sees 'thout stoppin' to see whether they're frien' or foe. He'll wake up some fine mornin', and find himself in a 'tarnal tangle, or a blasted rumpus, or some sich!"

The young man stood back, and stared at the old trapper with a vengeful gleam in his dark orbs, and in his hand he still held the revolver, as though meditating whether or not to make use of it even now.

"He expected we were followed by enemies, and in the uncertain light doubtless took you to be a savage. Perhaps he was imprudent, but he would not intentionally injure a friend," exclaimed Cora, still fearing that the ranger would do injury to the young man.

"Let him make his own 'pologies, miss, if he has any to offer. But I wouldn't trust him so far as I would a Texas weasel—I wouldn't, by hokey! He'll shoot his own shadow some day—see if he don't!"

The tone of the scout sounded less angry this time, but he still gazed at the face of Wirt Wiley penetratingly.

The young man returned the weapon to his belt, and stepped forward, extending his hand to the trapper. It was too dark to read the expression of his countenance very closely, but Nick could see that he was smiling, the angry glance having vanished from his eyes.

"Yes, I'll shake, youngster, 'cause you're white. I never lay up nuthin' as isn't intended. The frien's of this gal have got to be my frien's. And besides, we can't afford to do much shootin' atwixt us when ther are so many 'tarnal copper-hided imps 'round that need all the lead we kin give 'em. You're a good feller 'nough, only you're keerless, an' keerless folks get into 'tarnal tangles sometimes."

"I admit that I acted hastily, and that I was careless. But, though we are strangers, as you say, we cannot afford to quarrel in the midst of so much danger. I have heard you spoken of many times as a first-class scout. You have done me a great favor already in rescuing Cora Bland from her captors."

Wirt Wiley spoke in a friendly tone, and he had apparently decided to overlook the somewhat rough usage to which he had been subjected.

"Favor's are nothin', boy. The Lord sent me, as he allus does, to help human critters out'n tangles. But 'twon't answer fur us to stan' here and talk much longer. The quicker we git this gal back home the better."

The giant cast a quick, penetrating glance about them, and then started forward at a swift pace. Wirt and the girl following in silence, and they proceeded thus for several minutes. The way was slightly descending in grade, and they presently emerged upon the open prairie.

The moon, in its second quarter, had risen in the heavens, and shed a flood of pale light upon the scene. Nick Wharton halted, and grounded the stock of his long rifle, which, we forgot to mention, he had recovered.

A soft breeze rustled the prairie grass, which waved in the moonlight with a dreamy, undulating motion.

"Too 'tarnal still to indicate safety, I reckon," muttered Nick.

"There is a large encampment of Indians a short distance above this point, upon the banks of the creek," returned Wiley.

"I knowed it; an' another one out on the prairie; an' by hokey! thar's a horse at this minute!"

Sure enough, a large, graceful animal was trotting toward them, his head held aloft, his nostrils distended.

As he drew near he suddenly came to a halt and whinnied as though delighted at the sight of human objects.

"That horse thinks he knows us, and I don't know but he does. 'Tain't no Injun mustang, by a durned sight!" exclaimed Nick.

Cora Bland had been gazing at the animal with a half-perplexed expression upon her countenance, and now she suddenly ran toward it with a cry of joy.

"It is Prairie Phil's noble steed, and it recognizes me. Come, Blackbird, come! Where is your master?"

She spoke in low, coaxing accents, and the animal came boldly toward her with a whinny of recognition.

Nick Wharton looked on in amused surprise, but Wirt Wiley's brows contracted with a savage frown as he beheld the intelligent steed advance and rest his nose confidently upon the shoulder of the girl.

"So Prairie Phil goes there so often that even his horse knows and likes her!" the young man muttered, under his breath.

"If she likes the horse so well, how must she regard the rider? Has that smooth-faced boy

superseded me after all in her affections? Curse him, and his horse in the bargain!"

The young man pulled savagely at his mustache and glared jealously upon the girl, who still stood petting the steed. Suddenly he felt the great hand of the scout upon his shoulder. Turning, he beheld a lithe figure bound from the shadows of the timber, and the next moment it was by the side of Cora Bland.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FATE OF FLEETFOOT.

WE must now return to our young hero, whom we left locked in the embrace of a stalwart savage, and hanging pendant betwixt Heaven and earth.

With all his energy he clung to his opponent, and exerted himself to obtain a hold upon the latter's throat. His exertions caused excruciating pains to dart through his injured arm, and he felt the blood start anew from the wound. It seemed to him that his struggles, however desperate they might be, must prove hopeless against such odds. Yet the thought of being hurled to the bottom of that abyss nerved him to renewed effort, heedless of the pain it caused him.

Despite the horrible fate he would have to meet in case of failure, the prospect could not nerve his energies forever against such a powerful strain. He realized that every moment he was growing weaker, while the power of his adversary's arms seemed to increase rather than abate. Whatever was to be done must be done quickly. Accordingly, by a sudden, adroit movement he freed his sound arm from the grasp of the redskin, and delivered a sudden, powerful blow with his fist squarely between his enemy's eyes.

The savage saw the descending blow, but too late to avoid it. At the very instant it struck his low, retreating forehead, however, he succeeded in seizing the throat of the young guide in a vise-like clasp, which he tightened every instant.

Prairie Phil's strength suddenly deserted him, and strange, many-hued points of light seemed to be floating before his eyes. He felt the hold of his limbs upon the cottonwood log gradually relax, and he vaguely realized that in another moment he must fall into the black depths below.

At that instant a sharp, whip-like report rang on the air, sounding close to his ears. A howl of agony came from the lips of his opponent; his muscles relaxed; his form shot downward, striking upon the rocks with a dull, sickening crash.

Though relieved of the clasp of his foe, the young guide found himself too weak to extricate himself from his position. He felt a jar upon the log, and the next instant a dark form bent over him, and a strong hand grasped his, drawing him to a secure position.

As soon as he had recovered sufficiently to see clearly the objects around him, he bent his gaze upon his rescuer. He uttered a cry of surprise. The dim twilight revealed the face and form of a lithe Indian warrior confronting him!

But a second glance cleared his perplexity and alarm.

"It is Fleetfoot, the friendly!" he exclaimed, in a tone of joy.

The savage uttered an unintelligible ejaculation, and made a gesture toward the opposite side of the gully.

"Fleetfoot saw his white brother helpless in the arms of his foe, and did the only thing in his power to save him. The light was dim, and the bullet might have killed his friend instead of his foe. But the Great Spirit sent it where it should go, and the paleface was saved. But we must not stop here. There are enemies on every side, and we must find shelter in the shadows of the rocks and trees. Can Prairie Phil walk, or has his weakness made him like a papoose?"

The savage spoke in the Sioux dialect, which the young guide understood perfectly.

"Fleetlimb has done Prairie Phil a service which he never can forget," said the youth, in the same tongue, grasping the hand of the Indian with grateful warmth.

Then, speaking in English, he added:

"I can walk if I can get upon solid earth. Lead the way, and I'll follow. A little more, and I would have gone under, by jingoes!"

Fleetlimb obeyed in silence, and in another moment the twain were standing once more upon *terra firma*.

The Indian was a tall, athletic young warrior, of nearly the same age as the young guide. He was a full-blooded Sioux, but from some cause, of which no one knew save himself, he had always been friendly with the whites.

At Cottonwood Bend he was well-known, and the settlers placed limitless confidence in his fidelity. More than once had he proven himself a faithful spy and scout in their behalf, and the hostile savages hated and feared him alike.

Prairie Phil turned his attention to his wounded arm, which had become so painful as to be almost unendurable. He found it bleeding profusely, and, with the assistance of his red companion, he soon bandaged it, making it feel much more comfortable.

He found his rifle lying where he had thrown it before the commencement of the contest, and with it once more in his possession he felt renewed courage.

"We will cross the creek and make our way to the open prairie, Fleetfoot, for I am impatient to get to the settlement. I'm afraid it's too late already. I've had a hard chase all day, and I'm but little nearer the Bend now than I was when I started this morning. I had to abandon my horse in the bargain, and that came hardest of all."

"What you go to Bend for? Injuns going to tack settlers?" questioned the Indian in English, which he could speak as well as the average bordermen.

"No, not that. I can't explain now, but if you'll go with me I'll tell you about it on the way."

The savage pondered a moment in silence. Then he exclaimed, laconically:

"Me'll go. Come quickly, 'fore we have more trouble. Sh! Hear that?"

The concluding utterance was in a subdued whisper.

Several sharp, quick reports, evidently made by a small weapon, rang on the air, apparently within a hundred yards of the place where the twain were standing.

Without an instant's hesitation, Prairie Phil darted behind an adjacent tree, and Fleetfoot followed his example.

The shots were followed by savage yells, whose echoes lingered on the air in quavering accents for several seconds.

Then a period of deathlike silence ensued.

Prairie Phil was on the point of emerging from his concealment, when he beheld a dusky figure dart forth from a clump of bushes, and pass almost within reach of his arm. He remained perfectly motionless, and saw the savage approach cautiously the tree which concealed Fleetfoot. The next instant he saw the lithe form of the friendly Indian dart into view and hurl himself upon the red foe. In less time than that required to note the fact, the twain whirled past our hero in rapid, bewildering evolutions, which quickly brought them to the very brink of the abyss.

They seemed to pause involuntarily, for another foot would have sent them down into the black depths.

Without an instant's hesitation Phil darted from his concealment, revolver in hand, determined to return the service so lately rendered by his red friend. But he had not taken a half dozen paces ere he found himself confronted by a tall warrior, whose hideous, painted countenance was close to his before either noted the proximity of the other. It was evident the savage had also started to lend assistance to his friend, and thus another pair of foes met too closely to avoid a conflict.

But Prairie Phil knew better than to attempt a hand-to-hand combat when in such a weak condition, and it will be remembered that his knife was at the bottom of the creek, whither it had been hurled during his recent conflict upon the cottonwood log.

He knew that the report of his revolver would be likely to draw other foes to the spot, but it was his only means of defense at the present critical moment.

He raised his weapon with lightning-like quickness to a level with the dusky face of his enemy; there was a jet of flame that blazed into the black, baleful eyes; the savage sank to the earth without a groan; the quick report echoed among the rocks and hills.

Without an instant's hesitation, the young guide bent over the motionless form of his dead foe and possessed himself of the knife which he noticed protruding from a sheath at his belt.

With his new weapon grasped tightly in his right hand, he turned hastily to put an end to the conflict between Fleetfoot and the hostile savage.

A low ejaculation of intense amazement escaped the lips of our hero, and he started backward, appalled.

Where he had a moment ago beheld the fiercely struggling combatants, he now saw naught save the bare rocks and broken shrubbery!

Neither Fleetfoot nor his antagonist were anywhere to be seen, and a deathlike silence had fallen.

The youth shuddered involuntarily, a sense of keenest sorrow coming into his heart. The noble young Indian who had only a few minutes ago saved him from falling into the abyss, had now met with that terrible fate himself.

So quickly had the triple tragedy been enacted, that our hero could scarce realize that it was not all some dreadful phantasy of his imagination.

He strode hastily to the brink of the chasm, and examined the spot where the twain had been so desperately fighting a moment ago.

He discovered abundant signs of the struggle; and, with a sensation of horror, noted a circumstance which he not at first seen. A portion of loose rock and earth had become dislodged and precipitated into the creek; this explained the sudden and silent disappearance of the combatants.

The youth stooped and peered over the brink, trying to obtain a glimpse of the rocky bed of the creek; but the gloom was so dense and impenetrable that not an object was visible.

He drew backward hastily, and stood erect. He could hear the gurgling of the stream far below, the soft rustling of the night-wind around him; aside from these sounds a death-like silence pervaded the locality.

One thing was certain—he could in no way bring his friend back to life by standing there inactive, and the preservation of the living was more to be considered than useless regret for the dead.

With his lips tightly closed, and his hand clasping his rifle with sudden, vengeful determination, our hero turned away from the spot, and approached the cottonwood log which spanned the abyss.

He quickly crossed it and plunged into the belt of timber beyond. He had nearly reached the open prairie when he caught a bright gleam of light shining through the trees a short distance ahead. He came abruptly to a halt and gazed at the object, a puzzled expression coming into his countenance. The light glimmered fitfully as the intervening branches swayed to and fro in the soft breeze. For a moment the youth hesitated; then, holding his rifle in readiness for instant use, he crept silently, slowly toward the fire; for he was not certain that the light came from a camp-fire. At last he paused and gazed in upon a scene which filled him with intense wonder and curiosity. In the center of a small opening a fire, built of light, dry combustibles, was burning; and standing near, plainly revealed by its red, flickering light, were three tall, stalwart men, with brown, bearded faces, and clad and armed in true border fashion. To our hero, not one of the faces was familiar, and somehow he felt a vague presentiment that the strangers did not belong to the ordinary type of rangers who roamed the prairies and foothills.

At first he was on the point of revealing himself to them, but a second thought convinced him that it would be wiser to remain concealed until he had assured himself that they were friendly.

Accordingly he crouched in the dense shrubbery, and bent his head to listen.

The tallest of the strangers was speaking in a low, muffled tone, and he emphasized his remarks by flourishing one great, brawny hand in the air.

"I tell yer Dirk Hilders'll bear watchin', boys, an' no mistake. We're good 'nough to sarve his ends while he needs us, but he air too cussed high-toned to keer what becomes of us when he's done with us. Dirk would go back on his best friend for a gold nugget the size of his thumb-nail!"

Dirk Hilders! The sound of that name caused a flash of intense, vengeful hatred to come into the face of the youth. He bent forward to catch the reply of the next speaker. As he did so, a dry stick snapped beneath his knee with a sharp, ringing sound that caused the strangers to turn hastily, their hands dropping upon their weapons with menacing quickness!

CHAPTER VIII.

WIRT WILEY'S FLIGHT.

PRAIRIE PHIL held himself in readiness for instant flight, holding his breath in suspense. For a minute the men stood motionless, listening intently, and exchanging glances of alarm. Then the one who had been speaking suddenly started toward our hero with long, hasty strides. Phil hesitated no longer, but arising to his feet,

darted away through the woods in a direction parallel with the creek. There was no use attempting to make his flight noiseless, for in the darkness he could not help treading upon dry twigs and undergrowth. But while his footsteps made a sound audible to a considerable distance, the heavy tramp of his pursuers crashed through the undergrowth loudly enough to drown the noise of his own flight.

On—he ran, darting hither and thither to avoid large trees and impassable thickets; and on came his enemies in swift pursuit, following close at his heels. In vain did he attempt to throw them off his track. They seemed to follow with instinctive certainty in his very footsteps. The timber growth became more and more thick and impassable, and he began to pant with his exertion. The exhaustion caused by his recent struggle, and the loss of blood from his wound, still left their effect upon his endurance, and he found himself unequal to a protracted chase.

Acting upon an impulse, he changed his course abruptly to the right, which brought him nearer the open prairie. As he did so, the sounds of pursuit seemed a trifle more distant. He increased his speed, and the next moment emerged upon the open prairie.

Just within the shadows he came abruptly to a halt; a low exclamation of mingled amazement and delight escaping his lips.

A few paces distant he beheld the familiar, graceful form of Blackbird, and standing by his side, caressing and speaking to him in soft, coaxing accents, stood a slender young girl, whom he instantly recognized as Cora Bland.

For a brief moment the young guide gazed upon the strange scene; then he ran forth from the shadows of the timber, and paused close beside the young girl.

Blackbird turned his head with a whinny of recognition; Cora uttered a low exclamation of joy.

"Prairie Phil, I'm so glad you are here. I knew, when I saw your horse, that you could not be far distant," she said.

"And how came you so far away from home at this time of night?" the youth asked, in a tone of surprise.

"I was captured by Indians while on the creek in a canoe, and was brought up among the foothills. Nick Wharton, a brave, eccentric old ranger, rescued me by a stratagem, and I am now on my way back to the Bend with him and Wirt Wiley. They are standing yonder. But I'm glad you have come!"

The youth, at any other time, would have felt highly gratified at her frank expression of pleasure at his coming. But the mention of Wirt Wiley's name caused a flash of hatred to come into his handsome, boyish face.

"Wirt Wiley here, Cora? And were you with him when the Indians took you?" he exclaimed.

"Yes; and he came near being killed by one of the savages in the waters of the creek."

"He come nigh being killed," repeated Phil, in a low, intense tone.

"There isn't an Indian hereabouts as wouldn't fight for Wirt Wiley, rather than against him! Wirt is a traitor, and if he lured you away from your home in a canoe, it was for the purpose of turning you over to the redskins. And so Nick Wharton is in these regions? He you can trust, Cora, and if he knew Wirt Wiley as I know him, he would shoot him dead in his tracks. I'll do it the first chance I get."

The young ranger spoke fiercely, and he turned eagerly toward the two men standing upon the edge of the prairie, a menacing gleam in his eyes.

For the moment he had forgotten about the foes from whom he had been fleeing, but as he changed his position, he heard the crashing of underbrush once more, the sounds drawing rapidly nearer.

With the quickness of an electric flash he seized the light form of Cora and placed her upon the back of the steed, and placed the bridle-rein in her hands.

"There are white outlaws in pursuit of me, and I wouldn't have them catch you for the world. They belong to Dick Hilder's gang, and you had better be dead than alive as a captive among them. Don't leave the back of Blackbird for anything. He will carry you safely to the Bend if you ask him to. Nick and I can take care of ourselves."

With these words, uttered rapidly and in a low tone, Prairie Phil turned and ran toward the two men who had witnessed the strange maneuver with a gaze of wonder.

Exclamations of recognition escaped the lips of Wirt and the ranger simultaneously:

"Ef it isn't Prairie Phil, by the jumpin' jews—"

harps!" exclaimed Nick Wharton, advancing with extended hand.

But the boy was too excited to return the salutation.

"We can't stop to palaver, Nick. There are three of Dick Hilder's men within fifty yards of us, and we've either got to run, or fight like blazes!"

The giant comprehended the situation in an instant.

"Then I say fight, youngster! I'm good fur two of the pizen imps hand-to-hand. You an' Wiley can dispose of t'other one atween ye."

"I shall have to 'tend to Wirt Wiley myself, Nick. He is a traitor, a vile, two-faced cuss, too mean to be called a redskin or a white man. There he goes, now!"

Phil pointed toward a lithe figure just disappearing among the trees. At the name instant he raised his small rifle and pulled the trigger, directing the shot toward the point whither Wirt had gone from view.

But there was no cry of pain, and the young guide realized that he had thrown away the shot. At that moment the three outlaws dashed out into the moonlight. Simultaneously with their appearance, a loud report rang on the air, and one of them fell headlong into the prairie grass with a groan of death agony.

"He's salted, sure as polecats!" exclaimed Nick, dodging behind a tree and reloading his long rifle.

Prairie Phil followed his example, and none too soon, for one of the rifles of the enemy cracked, and a bullet hurtled past close to the young guide's ear.

Before Phil could return the shot, the two remaining outlaws darted in among the trees, and all became deathly silent.

"'Twas too 'tarnal mean that they wouldn't give us another shot at 'em. We mout jest as easy make a clean job of it while our hands wur in," observed Nick from behind his tree.

"I'd rather get a shot at Wirt Wiley than anybody else just now. He is in league with the Injuns and outlaws, and I know it. He made himself scarce about the time I come in sight, didn't he?"

"Shud say he did sort o' light out, so to speak," returned the giant.

"I s'pected he wa'n't all right when I fust put eyes on him. But he seemed on the butter side of the gal, and I tho't mebbly I misjudged him. But whar's the gal gone? I seed your horse gallopin' away like a greased northwester with her on his back."

"Blackbird will take her to Cottonwood Bend in less than two hours. She is safer with that horse than with us, and Wirt Wiley around. In my mind it was by his cussed connivance that she was captured by the reds to-day; and he would have managed to betray her into their clutches again before morning if I hadn't happened along. He suspects that I've picked out his true character, and you may be certain he'll keep shy of me in future."

"Sweet on the gal, eh?" queried Nick, laconically.

"He tries to be; but I reckon his bread is dough with her now. She's a mighty nice girl, Nick."

The old ranger chuckled significantly.

"So—so," he muttered, half to himself.

"I reckon that's something that smells like rivalry atwixt these two boys, an' that's at the bottom o' the tangle. A gal will raise a rumpus with the level-headedest boy that ever kerried a rifle, I don't keer who. Mebbe t'other one's square 'nough, arter all."

Nick said this in so low a voice that his companion did not hear at all.

"How do you know young Wiley's a traitor, boy?" he asked, in a louder tone.

"Know? How do I know you're a friend?"

Didn't I see him talking peaceably as you and I be this minute with an Indian chief, only last night, and didn't I hear him say that he would have Cora Bland for his wife, if he had to clean out the whole settlement for the sake of getting her? What I see I know, Nick. I never trusted Wirt, and have always watched him. But till yesterday I never found anything to bring up against him that I felt sure of. It wouldn't be safe for him to meet me face to face after this. I would shoot him as I would a coyote!"

The youth spoke vehemently, his eyes flashing with half-suppressed anger.

Nick was about to reply, when he saw a dark figure flit from one tree to another a few yards distant. He had not time to fire upon the object, but he fixed his eyes upon the tree that concealed it with silent vigilance.

Several minutes passed away, and the positions of both friends and foes remained un-

changed. The white moonlight illuminated the broad, undulating expanse of prairie land, and fell upon the stark form of the outlaw whom Nick's rifle had brought to earth. Not a living object was in sight, Blackbird and his fair rider having disappeared down the creek.

Prairie Phil kept on the alert for stratagem on the part of the foe, for he knew the outlaws had not given up their purpose thus readily. That he had been spying upon them they were well aware, and they were determined that he should not elude them. Dick Hilder's gang of robbers and outlaws had for several months been a terror to the white settlers along Cottonwood Creek, and more than one expedition had been organized and sent out to annihilate them.

But each attempt had proven a failure, for the outlaws had their head-quarters, and once there, they were able to defy a regiment of United States troops.

Whom Dick Hilder was, nobody knew. Nor had any of the settlers ever seen him that they knew of. Some suspected that he dwelt at Cottonwood Bend in disguise. Other savered that he remained at the headquarters of his band, never exposing himself to the danger of capture or identification.

Of his appearance or hiding-place Prairie Phil was as ignorant as the border settlers. And therefore the mystery seemed no nearer solution than ever.

Numerous base crimes and bold robberies had been committed by members of Dick Hilder's gang in the vicinity of the Bend. Among others, a young girl of nearly the same age as Cora Bland had been abducted a month prior to the opening of our story. Her name was Jennie Grayson, and she was a close friend and confidante of Cora. Hence the fierceness of Prairie Phil's hatred of Dick Hilder. The youth had sworn to run the gang to earth, and for a number of days he had been roaming the prairies and foot-hills in hope of gaining a clew to the location of their retreat.

But thus far his quest had been a vain one.

Nick Wharton kept his keen grey eyes riveted upon the tree which he knew concealed an outlaw with persistent patience. Suddenly a rifle barrel protruded around the trunk, and a loud report rang on the air. The ranger recoiled with a cry of pain. A portion of his left arm had not been shielded, and the bullet from his enemy's weapon had sought the exposed part with unerring certainty. Fortunately, the bone was not injured by the shot, although an ugly flesh-wound was made. At that moment a cry of dismay escaped the lips of Prairie Phil, as a dark form shot down from a tree top close by, followed by another and another at various points near them. At the same instant a savage, triumphant shout split the air; but above the yells of the enemy Phil heard the stentorian tones of Nick Wharton:

"It's rainin' Injuns, boy! Now fur a 'tarnal tangle!"

CHAPTER IX.

PRAIRIE PHIL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

AT nearly the same instant that the startling shout of the old trapper rang on the air, the loud report of his heavy rifle sounded, followed by the death-wail of a stricken savage. There was a fierce, triumphant yell from one of the outlaws, who darted from his concealment, and dashed toward the old ranger, firing upon him with his revolver as he came. But Nick anticipated the maneuver, and the shots hurtled harmlessly past. Before the outlaw could divine the intentions of the ranger, the latter leaped upon him like a gigantic panther, bearing him to the earth almost without resistance. The outlaw, great, burly fellow though he was, found himself helpless as an infant in the hands of his giant antagonist. Before he could even draw his knife, Nick had driven his own to the hilt in the breast of the wretch.

There was no time for hesitation or palaver. Two redskins dashed upon Prairie Phil with uplifted tomahawks, but the young guide did not for an instant lose his presence of mind. His small, unerring rifle caused one to bite the earth, and the other found the shining barrel of a revolver presented in his very face. Before he could dodge behind a protecting tree, the quick report sounded, and the redskin sank to the earth beside his companion.

All this had occurred in less time than it has taken to describe it. The two whites had been prepared for an overwhelming attack, and their every motion told with terrible results upon the foe. Three savages and one of the remaining outlaws had been placed where they could do no

more harm in the world, and their comrades were struck with dismay. In truth, the giant ranger, with his great rifle, that seemed to shake the earth every time he discharged it, and his quick, agile movements and prodigious strength, filled the hearts of the Indians with sudden terror and dismay.

As Nick sprang again to his feet, he drew a revolver from his belt; but the remaining redskins had taken care to shelter their persons behind available objects. The two whites followed the example of their foes, and commenced rapidly to reload their weapons.

Phil chose a large cottonwood tree as a shield—the largest in the vicinity; and as it stood upon the very edge of the belt of timber, he felt secure from attack in the rear. He had barely finished reloading, when he heard a slight sound, proceeding, apparently, from the opposite side of his barricade.

He cautiously peered around the trunk. As he did so, he scarce repressed a cry of intense amazement.

His gaze was met by a pair of jet-black, bead-like eyes, which were full of baleful hatred and cunning. They were not twenty inches distant from the face of our hero.

The latter instantly realized the situation.

A savage had chosen the same tree for shelter that he had, thus placing the foes face to face, with only the trunk of the cottonwood between them.

Simultaneously both the savage and the boy dodged backward, the former giving utterance to a grunt of astonishment.

The situation struck our young hero as being ludicrous in the extreme, and he was inclined to make the most of it upon that score.

He drew his revolver, which was the only weapon that he would be likely to have use for in that position, and waited for his foe to again expose some portion of his person. But that was something that the redskin was in no wise inclined to do.

The Indian had no weapons save his tomahawk, rifle and knife, and none of these could be used without exposing some part of his body to the marksmanship of his enemy. Consequently the position of our hero was, to say the least, rather preferable to that of the redskin.

For several minutes the two remained perfectly motionless, each listening for some sound of movement upon the part of the other.

It struck Phil at last that the situation was not so felicitous as he had at first supposed. While he had the advantage in point of weapons, he could not use that advantage unless his foe chose to give the opportunity. This he knew the savage was too wise to do. Therefore, one was as much compelled to stand inactive as the other. For the life of him our hero could see of no way by which he could extricate himself from his difficulty without interference from his friend. He set his brain to work in an endeavor to invent a piece of strategy by which he might outwit the savage.

And without doubt the brain of the latter was busy in a similar attempt. While Prairie Phil was studying upon the matter, he heard a slight movement upon the part of his foe. He did not dare to peer around the tree for fear that the savage stood ready to strike upon the instant of his exposure. So he waited in breathless suspense.

Suddenly there was a clipping sound among the branches above, and before our hero could glance upward to ascertain the cause, something struck with stinging force upon his hand, dropping thence to the earth. He recoiled slightly, and, at the same instant a tomahawk whizzed past his head, missing it by scarce a half-inch of space. The object which had struck his hand so sharply was a rifle-ball, and it had been thrown upward by his foe and fallen thither, the purpose being to cause him to move aside, and thus expose his person. The maneuver had been successful, so far as causing the youth to move was concerned, and he had exposed himself slightly upon the impulse of the moment. But the haste of the Indian in hurling the weapon spoiled the effect, and saved the life of the boy. It struck the trunk of the tree and glanced sideways sufficiently to send it past the head of Phil.

The young guide instantly comprehended that his foe was partially disarmed, and did not delay taking the advantage thus afforded. With a quick bound he brought himself face to face with the redskin, and the sharp report of his revolver rang on the air. The Indian had seized his rifle and started to gain new shelter, but his attempt was too late. The unerring aim of the youth brought him to the earth with a howl of pain.

At this juncture Phil turned to gain the shelter

of the cottonwood once more, when to his dismay he beheld the remaining one of the three outlaws dashing towards him with swift bounds.

He was a great, muscular fellow, and the youth did not care to risk a hand-to-hand encounter with him. Therefore, he wheeled suddenly, and ran at the top of his speed through the timber in the direction of the creek.

The outlaw came on in swift pursuit, and in a few minutes both had left the scene of the recent conflict far behind. His foe was so close at his heels that the youth had no chance to make a stand and use his fire-arms; and so they ran on and on without either making any perceptible gain.

In a few minutes our hero arrived at the bank of the creek, and he was compelled to turn abruptly to one side. As he did so, he dodged behind a tree, and stood at bay.

The next instant the outlaw halted, with the small, shining barrel of Phil's revolver staring him in the face. With a quick movement he knocked up the weapon, and the shot went harmlessly over his head.

But the young guide was more than equally quick in action, and the next moment he sprang to one side, cocking the weapon as he did so.

He was just in time to avoid the descending knife of the outlaw, the point of which slashed through his hunting shirt, just grazing his shoulder.

Again the revolver cracked, and this time the outlaw sank to the earth with a half savage groan.

Prairie Phil thought the shot had been fatal, and turned away with a long breath of relief. But he had not gone a half-dozen paces ere the ruffian arose to his feet, and came staggering toward him, his wicked countenance distorted by mingled pain and rage. To add to the hideousness of his aspect, a current of dark blood flowed from a wound in his head, tinging his hair and beard to a purplish hue.

In his hand he still held the knife, which caught and reflected the white gleam of moonlight which fell in rifts through the treetops.

Again the youth halted; again he leveled the small weapon which had done him such excellent service; again the sharp, quick report rent the air.

This time he had opportunity to take better aim, and the ruffian sank once more to the earth in a quivering, silent heap.

The youth turned away with a shudder of disgust at the horrible spectacle.

Entering a thick clump of bushes close to the river-bank, he crouched down to regain his breath and reload the empty chambers of his revolver. For several minutes he remained in his new retreat, feeling comparatively safe for the time.

He was not satisfied with himself, however, in thus leaving his companion to combat their enemies unaided, and as soon as he felt equal to the undertaking, he started to return to the scene of their late conflict. As he did so, he glanced casually toward the creek, and upon its black surface something caught his eye which brought him quickly to a halt.

At that point the stream was narrow and deep, and upon each bank overhung tall, rank-growing shrubbery that cast black shadows upon the surface of the water, making it appear like a river of blackest ink.

Upon that dark surface the youth beheld what appeared to be a tiny point of light, drifting with the swift current, and occasionally pausing and whirling rapidly as it encountered a tiny whirlpool.

It seemed like a coal of fire as he viewed it, and his mind was filled with a sudden, irresistible curiosity to learn its nature.

He returned to the river-bank at a point below the floating object, and waited for it to drift past. As it approached, it seemed to be drawing nearer the side upon which he was standing, and acting upon a sudden thought, he drew his knife, and hastily cut a long, slender bush.

Reaching outward with this, he was enabled to guide the floating object within reach of his outstretched arm. He gave utterance to a low, intense cry of amazement. He found the object to be a tiny bark canoe, scarce six inches in length, and containing a small glass vial. He instantly understood the cause of the point of light which had at first so mystified him. The vial contained a small piece of phosphorous, and was filled with some kind of oil. There was a punctured stopper which admitted sufficient air to keep the phosphorous burning. Besides this curious device, the little craft contained something which interested our hero yet more deeply.

There was a small roll of paper, and upon it

were written several lines in a neat, even chirography. Using the vial, with its contents, as a lamp, Prairie Phil eagerly perused the strange epistle. It was as follows:

"Whoever of my followers who find this, come at once to the 'lone rock' upon the north bank of the creek. Don't delay a moment, for I am in trouble. DICK HILDERS."

Again and again did the youth scan the singular note, each moment his wonder and curiosity increasing.

This, then, was written by the unknown, terrible Dick Hilders, whose name had become a horror to the border-settlers for miles around. Could that neat, elegant chirography have flown from the hand of a great border ruffian such as Phil had imagined Dick Hilders to be? The inconsistency was more than our hero could understand, and the more he pondered upon the matter, the more unfathomable the mystery became, and the deeper his curiosity and interest. And where was "lone rock," the rendezvous appointed in the epistle? Our hero was thoroughly familiar with almost every land mark within a radius of fifty miles of Cottonwood Bend, and he tried to think of one which would tally with the title of "lone rock."

Suddenly he sprang to his feet, and exclaimed, in an audible tone:

"I know where 'lone rock' is, and I'm going to answer this call, by jingoos! I reckon Dick Hilders will find himself in more trouble, afore he does less."

CHAPTER X.

BRUTE AND HUMAN FOES.

WE will now return to Cora Bland, whom we left upon the back of Blackbird upon the edge of the prairie.

As Prairie Phil turned away, Cora spoke in low, coaxing tones to the steed, at the same moment tightening the reins.

Though reluctant to leave the side of his young master, Blackbird bounded away obediently, and flew over the undulating surface of the prairie with the speed of the wind.

Cora had no time to remonstrate against the commands of the young guide had she wished to do so; and she did not stop to question the wisdom of this hastily-formed plan for her escape.

As she reflected upon the matter, it struck her that she was more secure upon the back of this noble steed than she could be even under the protection of Nick Wharton, in whom she had already come to place deep confidence. The words of the young guide in reference to Wirt Wiley had filled her with a sudden, indescribable sense of doubt and regret.

Writ Wiley a traitor! It did not seem that it could be true, for he had always seemed like a man possessed of a high sense of honor. At the settlement he was much liked by all the settlers, and he had often remained there a week at a time.

Prairie Phil, however, had, for some reason, never seemed to like the young man, and the dislike had become by degrees mutual. And now, as Cora pondered the matter by herself, fresh from the presence of them both, it occurred to her that Phil as well as Wirt Wiley was in love with her. If this was the case, was not their hatred for each other the outgrowth of rivalry? If Phil's dislike for Wirt sprang from a jealous impulse, might not his remarks just uttered be founded entirely upon his own imaginary grievance?

Gradually Cora Bland decided that she would not condemn Wirt Wiley in her heart until somebody besides the young guide spoke against him. For the first time since she had known him, she felt a suspicion that Prairie Phil had not been quite honest with her; and that his words against Wirt were prompted by selfish motives. Perhaps Wiley was the most honorable of the two, after all.

Very busily her brain kept at work upon the problem as she rode onward, until she was at last aroused from her revery by a sound that sent a chill to her heart. Blackbird, too, heard the sound, and she was conscious of a quickening of his bounds.

In the distance a prolonged, signaling howl rang on the air, seeming to linger in mournful, quivering accents. An instant later an answer came, this time from a point much nearer than the first. Then another and another rang on the still air, growing nearer, louder, more unmistakable in their purpose each moment.

Blackbird needed no urging from his young rider to induce him to increase his pace. Those

menacing howls were full of significance to the ears of the intelligent animal. More than once had he galloped over the prairie with wolves snarling and leaping close in his rear, with his young master upon his back keeping them at bay with rifle and revolvers.

With a wild snort of terror he bounded ahead, his muscles quivering with increased effort.

And Cora leaned forward upon his neck, patting him soothingly, her face growing deathly white, her own form trembling with a new fear. Well she knew the cowardly persistence of the foes she now had to contend with. And she realized, also, that even the fleetness of Blackbird could not equal that of his pursuers, and that ere long they would be overtaken.

Oh, if she could only reach the settlement before the wolves gathered in sufficient numbers to venture an attack! But she well knew that Cottonwood Bend was still more than an hour's ride distant, and in much less time than that she would be overtaken.

On—on, bounded the noble animal, his long rest since Prairie Phil's wild ride of the day before having recuperated his energies to an extent which rendered him equal to almost any task. His own terror lent him more than usual fleetness, and he seemed to literally fly through the tall prairie grass.

Cora Bland looked backward.

The broad expanse of prairie-land was illumined almost as brightly as by day. Far in her rear she beheld several dark forms bounding through the grass with remarkable swiftness, which visibly decreased the intervening distance. She could not repress a shudder of intense horror as she gazed upon the approaching forms with a sort of fascinated persistency.

Now and then their numbers were augmented by new forms, which came from different directions, called thither by the signaling howls.

As they drew nearer, and the scent of their would-be prey came freshly to their senses, the pursuing wolves redoubled their efforts, and came on at an increased pace.

Nearer—nearer they came, until she could hear the swishing sound they made as they sped through the grass. Their howls were changed to short, impatient snarls, as they bounded over and around each other in their attempts to gain their goal.

Still Blackbird galloped steadily onward with unabated swiftness, straining every nerve to outstrip his pursuers.

Closer came the horde of quarreling brutes, their red jaws apart, their tongues now and then protruding, as though in anticipation of the feast.

Now a number of them were snapping savagely at the very heels of the noble steed; and while his rider was clinging closely to his neck, he half came to a halt and kicked at them with spiteful energy, tumbling them over each other in a howling, struggling heap.

For a minute or two the cowardly brutes permitted the horse to distance them once more; but they soon mustered new courage, and approached their prey with swift bounds. Each moment the hopes of the young girl sank lower, and she clung almost frantically to the neck of the flying steed.

A wild, incoherent prayer went up to Heaven from her pallid lips, and she covered her face with her hands to shut out the sight of the leaping, snarling horde that surrounded her. For now the wolves had overtaken them again, and many of them had run ahead of the horse, leaping, bounding, circling with bewildering rapidity, yet keeping at a safe distance from the powerful limbs of the steed. Gradually, cautiously, they drew nearer, growing bolder as their numbers increased, until the frantic horse seemed to be moving amid a sea of glowing eyes and red jaws—a sea that momentarily threatened to engulf him with his human rider.

The animal uttered a wild, half-human scream of terror, and for a moment the brutes fell back again. But they soon returned to the attack with increased boldness. Then Cora, noting the effect of Blackbird's cry, raised her own clear voice in a wild, piercing shout that rang over the prairie with clarion clearness.

Again the horde of foes fell back, and another brief respite was gained. Repeatedly the terrified girl uttered sharp, unearthly cries, keeping the wolves at bay for a time. But they soon became heedless of that also, and steadily closed around the horse. Cora closed her eyes to shut out the horrifying spectacle, and bent forward, resting her face amid the tossing mane of Blackbird. She could feel the animal's powerful muscles quiver with the strain; she could hear his panting breath; upon every hand were the snapping, snarling brutes, their fangs gleaming

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE TOILS.

white in the moonlight, their red jaws opening and closing in eager anticipation of the feast.

Suddenly Blackbird came to a halt, kicking fiercely right and left, uttering again that half-human cry of terror. But the foe heeded not his frantic attempts to drive them back. Cora clung wildly to the neck of the bounding steed, every hope of escape gone from her heart. In another moment she expected to be torn from his back, and she held her breath in suspense.

But at this moment a howl of mingled terror and disappointment went up from the throats of the brutes, and it seemed to her that they were fleeing from the spot. And once more she was conscious of being borne swiftly—steadily onward. More and more distant sounded the howl of the wolves, and Blackbird uttered a neigh of delight. Still the girl did not raise her face to ascertain the cause of the singular lull. She could not realize that the beasts had really abandoned their attack—it seemed to her like some alluring pleasantry of her terrified brain. She had given up every vestige of hope for succor—had almost reconciled herself to the dreadful fate which had seemed inevitable. For several minutes she remained thus, almost indifferent to her peril—incredulous of the apparent flight of the wolves.

But presently she heard a new sound which aroused her to the fact that she was laboring under no phantasy—the sound of approaching horses. She could feel a perceptible jar of the earth, which indicated that they were close at hand.

Her heart gave a great bound of joy and hope, and she raised her face from the black, shining neck of the horse. Quickly her eyes scanned the surrounding prairie, and then her heart sank again, and her lips uttered a low cry of dismay.

Less than a hundred yards distant, and approaching at a swift pace, was a band of mounted Indians, their plumes waving, their painted faces glowing with savage triumph.

Cora seized the bridle rein which she had permitted to rest idly upon the neck of Blackbird, and drew it suddenly taut, turning his head away from the approaching foes. All her courage and presence of mind returned to her, now that she had human instead of brute foes to escape. And the noble steed, though jaded by his protracted run, seemed to gain energy from the reassuring hand of his rider, and bounded over the plain once more with renewed swiftness.

Observing the maneuver of the fugitive, the pursuing redskins uttered a fierce chorus of yells, in the hope of terrifying her into surrendering at once. But they only served to increase her determination to escape them, and she leaned forward and spoke in low, encouraging accents to the horse, patting his neck the while.

On bounded the noble Blackbird, and on came the yelling savages, lashing their jaded mustangs to their utmost speed. But it was evident that the latter were in no condition for a long chase, for the flying steed of our heroine distanced them at every bound.

The girl looked backward, feeling a sudden sense of hope as she saw the increased distance intervening between her horse and her pursuers. At this moment a rifle report rang out on the air and a bullet hurtled past in close proximity to her face. Then there came another and another in rapid succession, but it was evident that they were aimed at Blackbird rather than at Cora. But the distance, added to the deceptive light of the moon, rendered the aim of the savages very uncertain, and each successive shot went more and more wide of its mark.

Less than a mile ahead stretched the dark belt of timber which marked the course of the creek, and toward this she directed the course of the Blackbird. She knew that the settlement of Cottonwood Bend could not be far distant from that point.

The Indians soon ceased their firing, and permitted their horses to follow at a more moderate pace. Yet they kept directly in the tracks of Blackbird, as though determined not to abandon the pursuit, however hopeless it might be. In a few minutes Cora found herself amid the shadows of the timber, and there, secure from the shots of the foe, she permitted the jaded animal to come to a halt and take breath. The trees grew thickly, and the branches were so low that it was difficult to ride between them; so the girl dismounted, and led the horse toward the creek. She soon reached the banks of the stream, and the steed took a long, refreshing draught from its clear depths. As the girl was about to turn and lead the animal from the spot, she heard a light footstep close at hand.

With Prairie Phil, to think was to act. Thrusting the daintily written epistle into a pouch, he cast the tiny canoe and phial back into the creek.

Then, with his rifle held in readiness for instant use, he started at a swift, silent pace up the creek, keeping close to its bank. As he walked he partook of a quantity of pemmican with which he was provided, for he felt the need of refreshment most sorely. He was conscious of an almost overpowering sense of fatigue also, and he realized that he must soon find opportunity to obtain an hour's sleep, or he would give out entirely. Upon the night previous he had slept but little, and all day long he had been on the move. Tough and hardy though he was, there was, nevertheless, a limit to his powers of endurance, and that limit seemed nearly reached. But, surrounded by known and unknown dangers, he could not think of relinquishing his vigilance for even a moment. And the thought of Dick Hilders, and the strange epistle of which he had become possessed by such an odd circumstance, made him eager to solve the mystery which had tantalized him for so long. As he walked steadily onward, his mind reverted to Cora Bland, whom he had sent upon a solitary ride across the plain upon the back of his trusty steed. Hastily as he had decided to do so, it seemed to him that it was the best plan for her escape that he could have formed. He realized the perils she would be liable to encounter upon her solitary journey, but had she remained with himself and the giant scout her peril would have been tenfold greater. Therefore, hazardous as it seemed in sending her upon her lonely ride, he had done the one thing which could be done to ensure her even a chance of escape. Yet he was haunted by a sense of keenest anxiety for her safety, and he would willingly have braved any danger to assure himself that her flight had been successful.

He felt satisfied upon one point, at least—that he had foiled Wirt Wiley in his scheme to abduct Cora—for he felt satisfied in his own heart that such had been the purpose of the young man. When he had mentioned the fact of Wirt being a traitor to Cora that night, she had made no reply. But he had noted a half-incredulous expression upon her face, which led him to fear that she did not believe his statement. Had Wirt Wiley already won the love of Cora Bland? The possibility caused a keen sense of disappointment to Prairie Phil, and in that brief moment of reflection he realized that the beautiful Cora was queen of his heart, and would henceforth hold sway over his happiness. More than once had he experienced a pang of jealousy at her evident friendliness toward Wirt. She had always treated him in a friendly manner, too; but he was conscious of an indefinable something in her demeanor toward Wirt Wiley which he would rather she would not have shown. So buried was the young guide in his reflections that he scarce noticed the distance he had traversed, until he suddenly emerged into a small opening. He recognized the place instantly. Quickly crossing it, he entered the thickly-growing shrubbery beyond. The next moment he beheld the cottonwood log spanning the creek, upon which he had come near meeting his doom several hours before. Without an instant's hesitation he crossed it, keeping a sharp lookout for enemies as he did so. As he glanced down into the black depths he could not repress a shudder of horror; and as he reached the opposite bank, his gaze wandered involuntarily toward the spot where he had last seen the faithful Fleetfoot struggling with a foe. But he had no time now to indulge in regretful musings, for he was bent upon solving the mystery concerning the identity of Dick Hilders—of meeting him face to face, if possible.

He did not pause to count the risks he was running in thus going alone to meet the noted outlaw, who had become the terror of the settlements. The location of "lone rock" he kept uppermost in his mind, and as he drew near the point where he knew it to be, he redoubled his caution. At last he emerged upon a broad, rocky plateau, devoid of tree or shrub, beyond which the ascent became steep and precipitous. Near the northern extremity of the plateau he beheld the object of his journey—a huge, irregular column of rock, rising upward in massive grandeur to the height of fully thirty feet. There were no other conspicuous objects near it, and it well merited its appellation of lone rock.

The moon shone down upon the lovely scene with pale radiance; the wind swept down the mountain passes with a moaning, sighing sound;

in the distance could be heard the occasional bark of a coyote. But not a living object was in view. Prairie Phil paused to reflect.

If Dick Hilders was concealed in the vicinity, it would be dangerous to cross the plateau in the full light of the moon. Therefore the youth decided to approach lone rock from a different direction, and to reconnoiter carefully before exposing himself to the marksmanship of whoever might be concealed in the vicinity.

Accordingly he retraced his steps for a short distance, and made his way with extreme caution toward the lonely rock which overlooked the scene like a grim sentinel, fearless of foes or warring elements.

Presently he paused a second time, almost beneath the shadow of the towering column; all around were small boulders, piled one upon another, with here and there a patch of earth whence sprung stunted trees and shrubbery.

If Dick Hilders was concealed there, how could he be drawn from his hiding-place? This question our hero asked himself repeatedly, but no solution of the problem presented itself. Crouching down in a dark hollow close to the lone rock, our hero uttered a low, clear whistle.

It was a signal improvised at random; but, singularly enough, it answered its purpose. From some point beyond the giant rock a human figure emerged—a tall, slender figure, which somehow struck our hero as being familiar. As the stranger stepped into the white light of the moon, Phil scarce repressed a cry of intense amazement. Could he believe the evidence of his eyes? Was this man Dick Hilders, the bloodthirsty murderer and outlaw, of whom such horrible tales were current in the settlements? Like a gleam of light the truth flashed upon the brain of the youth.

The man, standing a dozen paces distant, glancing hastily about him for the author of the signal, was Wirt Wiley. And Wirt Wiley was, beyond a doubt, no other than Dick Hilders.

For a minute the young guide remained silent and motionless in his retreat, trying to convince himself that it was all a freak of his imagination. He even pinched himself, to see if he had not fallen asleep and was dreaming.

But it was no freak, no dream. The man standing yonder was Wirt Wiley; and Wirt Wiley was Dick Hilders the outlaw. Now he understood the seeming inconsistency of the daintily-written note which he had found, signed by Dick Hilders.

Such writing might well be expected by the small, feminine hand of Wirt Wiley.

Phil cocked his rifle, and unhesitatingly stepped out into the moonlight, pausing within a half-dozen paces of the young man. The latter uttered a low exclamation of mingled anger and surprise.

"Prairie Phil! and here!" he exclaimed, in a husky voice.

Our hero smiled in his cool, fearless fashion, and returned, in his distinct tones,

"Yes; and I'm here to meet Dick Hilders. I suppose I'm looking into the face of that individual at this instant."

The thin lips of Wirt Wiley, as we shall call him for the present, quivered slightly; but whether from fear or anger it would be hard to distinguish.

"Yes, I may as well admit that Dick Hilders and I are the same, for I see you have a clue. It would have been better for us both, perhaps, if you had not solved the mystery of my identity. My true name is that by which you have known me, and by which I am known in the settlements. Dick Hilders made a more suitable title for an outlaw, so I adopted it for that purpose. But how came you here, Phil? I left you two or three miles below, with Nick Wharton. You gave me a parting shot as I ran into the woods, which put a stop to my running, and made me proceed at a slower pace."

As he spoke, he placed his hand upon his thigh, where Phil could plainly see fresh stains of blood.

"So that shot wasn't wasted, eh?" said the youth, with a careless laugh.

"Not quite, though I could have made a better one with you for a mark, if I had been so disposed."

"Why didn't you do it?"

"Because I did not care to get mixed up in a fight just then—not that I should have felt any compunctious of conscience."

The outlaw spoke coolly, apparently not in the least disturbed by the evident advantage held by his enemy.

"You're a kind-hearted cuss, I'll allow," laughed the young guide.

But the stern expression of Wirt Wiley's countenance did not relax.

"I may not be so merciful a second time. But I ask you a question: What called you hither, almost directly upon my heels? You couldn't have tracked me the way I came."

"No, I didn't track you, nor did I follow you. But I found a note signed 'Dick Hilders,' and I thought maybe he would be delighted to see Prairie Phil. I didn't think I should find you here. But it's all the same, you've got to go back with me. I mean business, Wirt Wiley, and you know me well enough not to parley with me."

Phil spoke significantly, and his rifle was held in a position that threatened the outlaw with instant death upon the first sign of treachery.

Wirt Wiley drew his slender figure to its fullest height, and stared at our hero with distended eyes. But there was no sign of fear in his handsome countenance. His rifle was not in view, and his arms were folded with indifferent coolness upon his breast.

"You talk rather large for a boy!" he said, with peculiar emphasis.

"And I'm able to back every word of it, Wirt. I could shoot you in your tracks, if I chose—and I've half a mind to do it, by jingoes!"

Wiley compressed his lips with an expression of sudden, intense determination.

"But you will not do that—it would be the worse for you if you did!" he exclaimed, quietly.

"Do you defy me, Wirt Wiley?"

"Not that *quite*. Still I am not afraid of you, despite the advantage you seem to hold at the present moment."

Prairie Phil made an impatient gesture.

"You are parleying with me, in hopes that some of your friends will come to help you out of your trouble. I said I shouldn't parley, and I don't mean to. I've sworn to capture Dick Hilders, dead or alive, and I'm going to do it. Are you coming with me, or not?"

"I'm *not*!" uttered Wirt, in a sharp, clear tone.

Prairie Phil advanced a step nearer the outlaw his grey eyes blazing with anger, his rifle leveled at the breast of his enemy.

"Throw your knife and revolvers upon the ground, or I'll blow your brains into kingdom come. And mind you, no treachery, for my finger wouldn't have to press the trigger an ounce harder to put you where you wouldn't be worth anything, except as coyote meat! Do you hear?"

Wirt Wiley obeyed in sullen silence. In another moment he was as utterly defenseless as the rocks around them.

Prairie Phil lowered his rifle slightly, and advanced yet nearer, his eyes blazing with a determined light.

"Now will you come with me, Wirt Wiley? Or shall I mete out justice to you where you stand?"

"You can do as you like about killing me. I might have done the same by you, but did not. You would take me to the settlement and claim the glory of catching me, and I would have to swing from the limb of a cottonwood tree. That I will never do. I will not go a step with you as your prisoner. You have shown what you would do had you the power, and now I will show you what I can do!"

There was deep significance in the tone of the young outlaw, and at that moment a great, muscular arm swooped down from the rear of Prairie Phil, and a grip of iron closed upon his wrist, causing his rifle to drop to the ground, discharging as it fell!

CHAPTER XII.

ADVENTURES UNDERGROUND.

PRAIRIE PHIL had no time to resist the powerful grasp upon his arm, or even to catch a glimpse of the owner of that giant hand and arm. The next instant he received a heavy blow upon the temple, and he sank upon the rocky earth in a silent, quivering heap.

For a long time all was darkness and oblivion to the senses of the young guide. When he at last awoke to consciousness he found himself lying upon a heap of robes, surrounded by intense, impenetrable gloom. The atmosphere was pervaded by a damp, underground odor, and at no point was a ray or streak of light visible. The incidents immediately preceding his unconsciousness recurred with perfect clearness to the mind of our hero, and he realized that he must now be a captive in the power of Wirt Wiley.

His head seemed to be spinning around and around with dizzy rapidity as he tried to penetrate the gloom with his gaze. And at last, overcome by a sense of weariness, he became unconscious again—this time the restful, soothing oblivion of sleep.

How long he slept our hero had no means of calculating. When he awoke his eyes were greeted by a dim, flickering light emanating from some point close at hand. And as soon as his gaze became accustomed to it, he glanced upward and about him with some curiosity.

He found himself in a large, low, cavern apartment, with a rough, uneven floor, and jagged, irregular walls. From his present position he could see no exit to the room, and it was some time before he beheld the source of the dim, flickering light that illuminated the place.

Somewhat to his surprise, he found his arms and legs unbound, and as soon as his strength had returned sufficiently to prompt the effort he arose to a sitting posture, and took a more complete survey of his surroundings.

Upon a narrow, rocky shelf in his rear, almost above his head, he saw a small oil-lamp, whose flickering blaze radiated with dim uncertainty. But this was the only sign beside the robes upon which he sat that human beings had ever been there before him.

Prairie Phil realized his situation with the accustomed quickness of his active brain. He was in the stronghold of the outlaw, Dick Hilders, otherwise Wirt Wiley, and, therefore, completely at his mercy.

His long, undisturbed slumbers had refreshed him to a wonderful extent, and each moment he felt his strength returning to him. When he moved, he was conscious of a painful stiffness of his limbs, caused, doubtless, by his protracted and fatiguing exertions of the day before. And upon his forehead was a large protuberance, which marked the place where the stunning blow had fallen which had rendered him insensible.

For several minutes our hero sat and gazed about him upon the strange scene, his mind busy with the startling events which had occurred in such rapid succession during the past twenty-four hours. Then he arose to his feet, and stepped out upon the rocky floor of the cavern.

His hand wandered mechanically to his belt in quest of his weapons, but he was not surprised to find them gone.

He was absolutely defenseless, save for the weapons which nature had given him.

At this juncture he heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and in another moment a human figure emerged from behind a jutting rock, and paused a few paces distant. The comer was a tall, stalwart individual, with long, muscular arms, square, broad shoulders, woolly hair and whiskers, and a face black as ebony. There could be no doubting his nationality, for that he was a full blooded negro every feature and peculiarity plainly indicated.

For a moment he stood motionless, staring with white, distended eyes at our hero. Then he advanced again, and in a hoarse, grating voice, exclaimed:

"Woked up, hab yer? 'Gun to tink yer'd gone up de crik, where all dead white folks hab to go when dey stop libin' an' die."

He supplemented this somewhat original remark by a grin that parted his thick lips nearly from ear to ear, displaying a double row of large, white teeth.

"I reckon I don't die so easy as all that," returned Phil, coolly.

"You might have finished me easy enough while you was about it. Why didn't you do it?"

The African rolled his eyes until they seemed in danger of dropping from their sockets before he replied. Then he laughed in a chuckling, disagreeable manner.

"So I would hab done if de cap'n hadn't tole me to let yer lib. It don't make no difference what de cap'n tells me to do; I alus does it, an' says nuffin'. De cap'n would blow my brack brains into kingdom come if I didn't obey, an' he wouldn't so much as wink doin' of it. I seed him shoot one nigger when he fust come to dese parts. De cap'n am a little feller, but he am terrible when he am 'roused up!"

The fellow chuckled again, as though excessively amused by the sound of his own voice.

"I suppose your cap'n, as you call him, is Dick Hilders?" said Phil, in a questioning tone.

"Dat am what he calls himself. But I doesn't care what his name am, so long as he uses me well, an' he allers does 'ceptin' when he doesn't."

"What does he intend doing with me—do you know?" asked Phil, seeing that the African was inclined to be communicative.

"He doesn't tell me his 'tentions—nebber. He tole me to look sharp dat you didn't get away, an' to gib yer all yer wanted to eat. An' dat 'minds me, I come to ax yer if yer wasn't hungry—dat is, if yer was alibe. De cap'n nebber starves nobody, I can tell yer."

The young guide did not feel the need of food

at that moment, but he knew that he would be hungry in a little while if he moved about. So he replied:

"You may bring me all the grub you've a mind to, Charcoal, and I'll do my best to make 'way with it. I wish you would send your cap'n here, too—I would like to talk with him."

"Dé cap'n hab gone off; an' if he hadn't, he wouldn't come to see you; he doesn't do business dat way. I does all de 'gotiatin' wid de prisoners myself. But how you know my name am, Charcoal?"

Phil could not repress a smile of amusement at the expression of wonder upon the black countenance of his jailer. He had given him that title at random, and it seemed that he had hit upon his true name; but he decided not to betray that he had coined the name upon the impulse.

"I have a way of finding out a good many things you'll find," he said, mysteriously; "but you had better bring in the fodder before you forget it. I'm growing hungry as a coyote."

"So I will; 'nuff ob it to swell yer up bigger'n a grizzly."

The man turned away with another chuckle, and disappeared around the jutting rock.

The instant his back was turned, our hero stepped noiselessly after him, pausing as he found himself in a narrow, gloom-shrouded passage-way, the extent of which he could judge only by conjecture.

He could hear the retreating footfalls of the giant African, and acting upon a sudden impulse he followed as rapidly as he dared to do in the dense darkness. He was bent upon finding the exit to his prison, and the sooner he did so the better.

Of course he had no intention of remaining a passive captive if there was any chance of escape. And he had a presentiment that Wirt Wiley intended him little mercy, for he now had more than one cause to hate the young guide, with a hatred so bitter that it must find vent in vengeance of some sort upon its object.

Faintly the sounds of Charcoal's footsteps sounded ahead of him, and he followed as closely as he dared, for fear of betraying himself. But suddenly the sounds ceased and all became deathly silent.

Phil paused and listened.

Had the negro suspected his pursuit, and halted in the passageway to intercept him? It did not seem probable that such was the case, for the African appeared more than commonly thick-headed for his race.

For two or three minutes our hero stood silent and motionless, listening intently. But still no sound came to his ears.

Once more he moved forward, his caution redoubled, his senses keenly alert.

Suddenly he came again to a halt, and this time he could not repress a slight exclamation of dismay.

He found his progress barred by a solid, perpendicular wall of rock, and he could find no opening large enough for a weasel to creep through. Carefully he groped about, but to no purpose. His further progress was as effectually stopped as though a wall of solid masonry had suddenly reared itself in his path.

He turned and retraced his steps cautiously for a considerable distance, then halted and struck a match.

The feeble blaze flickered for a moment, illuminating a narrow radius. He availed himself of its brief illumination, and cast a quick glance around him. He beheld a narrow opening in the rocky wall close at hand, and instantly divined that the negro had gone in that direction.

Without a moment's hesitation he pushed through the aperture, finding himself in another dark corridor, more narrow and crooked than the first. Slowly and silently he pushed onward, halting at frequent intervals, to listen for sounds of his foe.

But none came to his ears. Had his weapons been in their accustomed places, he would not have feared for the result of his investigations; but as he was almost defenseless, he knew that to meet his black foe would put an end to his hopes of escape.

Therefore he proceeded with utmost caution.

Presently the passage way became more spacious, and at last he emerged into what seemed to be another underground apartment.

Here it was as intensely dark as it had been in the corridor, and he halted again, and once more struck a match, of which he always carried a good supply.

As soon as it burned brightly, he held it aloft, that it might the better reveal his surroundings.

He found that he was in a larger cavern even than that in which he had awakened to consciousness. On every side were rugged, perpendicular

walls, with jutting shelves, dark niches, and a lofty, arched dome above, to the top of which the feeble gleam of the tiny light did not penetrate.

But it contained no evidences of human occupation, and the atmosphere was pervaded by a damp, earthy odor. The match burned out, and darkness once more surrounded our hero.

He began to suspect that he was not upon the right track, after all, and that his jailer had gone in still another direction.

If such were the fact, it was likely that he had returned ere this, and discovered the flight of his captive. Prairie Phil began to fear that he had not acted very cautiously in thus starting upon an exploration of this vast underground cavern without even weapons or a light. But now that he had started upon the adventure, it was about as safe to proceed as to retreat, and the young guide was never ready to give up an undertaking, however hazardous or hopeless it might seem.

He reached out until his hands touched the wall of the cavern, and then he groped his way cautiously along.

Suddenly he started backward with a low cry of horror. His hand had come in contact with a cold, smooth object that had moved beneath his touch. At the same instant there was an ominous rattling sound, the import of which he well understood. He had placed his hand directly upon a rattlesnake which had been coiled upon a small shelf of rock. Realizing his danger, he sprang backward, and ran hastily to the opposite extremity of the apartment. Then he struck another match, glancing hastily around the place. To his satisfaction he espied another corridor opening close at hand, which had the appearance of being more straight and regular, and toward the further extremity he could discern a faint gleam of light. Without hesitation he started upon this new course, moving silently but rapidly toward the beacon light ahead. The next moment he emerged into another cavern apartment, which was pervaded by a dim light. As he glanced about him he gave utterance to a cry of intense amazement.

CHAPTER XIII.

EXPLORING THE OUTLAWS' RETREAT.

PRAIRIE PHIL raised one hand to his eyes, as though to make sure that what he beheld was no phantasy of his vision.

The apartment was small, circular in form, and barely high enough to permit an ordinary man to stand erect.

At the further extremity was a small lamp whose blaze flickered and spluttered fitfully. Near the lamp was a heap of robes, and upon these crouched a slender female figure.

As Phil uttered that quick cry of surprise, the woman turned abruptly toward him, bringing her countenance into the light.

"By jingo! if it isn't Jennie Grayson!" exclaimed the young guide, in his clear, ringing tones.

There was a sharp, glad cry, a rustle of garments, and the girl sprang from among the robes, and the next moment her arms were clinging about the neck of our hero, while her pretty eyes were gazing into his in tearful entreaty.

"Oh, Phil—Phil! you have come to rescue me from this dreadful place, have you not? I have been here such a long—long time, and tomorrow they were going to force me to become the wife of a great, brutal outlaw!"

Our hero had always regarded the pretty Jennie very highly, second only to Cora Bland, in fact. She was an orphan, and had worked at intervals in the cabins of several different settlers, and she had become endeared to many of them, and especially to the Blands.

She had no living relatives that she knew of, having been an inmate of an orphan asylum at the east until her fourteenth year, when she had been sent westward upon an emigrant train. The mystery enshrouding her parentage had called forth the deepest interest of Phil, for he, too, was a world's waif, and had never known parents or a home. His earliest recollections were of a lonely dwelling among the mountains, and of a strange, reticent man, who called himself "Mountain Ned." This man had provided for him during his childhood, and had taught him to make a livelihood for himself in the mountains and on the prairies.

When the young guide had reached his fifteenth year, Mountain Ned was suddenly missing, and no amount of search could reveal a clew to his whereabouts.

Though a singularly silent, uncommunicative

man, Phil had become deeply attached to him, and his sudden disappearance was a source of sorrow to our hero. He had no doubt that he had fallen a victim to either human or brute foes during his wanderings.

Five years had elapsed since the departure of Mountain Ned, and during that period Prairie Phil had won fame as a prairie scout and guide, and his services were constantly in demand.

Mountain Ned had never told the boy aught concerning his early life or parentage, and at that age our hero cared but little for a solution of the mystery. But as he had grown older, the subject frequently disturbed him, and he grew more and more anxious to learn about himself. But the mystery seemed utterly unfathomable.

This brief diversion being necessary at some point of our story to properly explain what is to follow, we insert it here.

When our hero found himself so warmly embraced by the pretty Jennie Grayson, he felt for a moment a sense of boyish embarrassment. But he soon overcame that, and acting under the temptation of red, quivering lips so close to his face, he kissed them with quiet assurance.

"I'll do what I can toward rescuing you, Jennie, but that may not be much, for I am a captive myself," he said, as she suddenly drew back, her pale cheeks flushing crimson.

"You a captive!" she repeated, the glad look going from her face as quickly as it came.

"Yes; or, at least, I was a little while ago. But I took a notion to explore the premises, and my wanderings brought me here. Is there an exit to the cavern near this point?"

"I think not. Nobody ever comes in except by the way you entered. I started to flee from here once, and got quite a distance along the dark passage, but one of the men caught me and brought me back. Then they made such threats that I dared not renew the attempt. And they told me that there was no chance for me to escape undiscovered."

The young guide mused a moment.

"If that is the case, we're in a fine pickle, and no mistake. But the men are all gone away now, except that great, blue-black imp who calls himself Charcoal. If I could only get him in my power, I would force him to lead us out of the cavern. I reckon I could scare him right easy if I had a revolver."

"Then you haven't any weapons, Phil?"

"Not so much as a jack-knife."

"Then I don't see what you can do to help us out of our difficulty."

"I can do my best—that's all. I don't propose to stay here if I can get away by any means. And now, while there's nobody but a nigger to guard us, is a better time to try than when the whole band of outlaws are present. And I stand more in fear of the captain than any of the others."

"Did you know, Phil, that Dick Hilders is no other than Wirt Wiley, who seemed so friendly to the settlers at the Bend?" exclaimed the girl.

"I didn't know of it until a little while ago. But Wirt and I never made any great show of friendship for each other. We both liked Cora Bland too well for that."

A shadow crossed the face of the girl as the youth said this. In her heart she wished Phil cared for herself instead of the settler's daughter. In her eyes he was the noblest, most heroic fellow on the border.

The young guide turned abruptly, and hastily made a circuit of the apartment.

There was only one point of egress—that by which he had entered. Nor was there anything which might serve as a weapon, save a fragment of rock which had become detached from the walls. This he seized, resolved to make use of it upon his black jailer if opportunity offered.

"We might as well leave this place, Jennie, for there is no chance of getting through these solid walls. If we meet Charcoal, I'll make cinder of him with this!"

The youth held his rude weapon aloft, and started toward the point at which he had entered the cavern.

Jennie Grayson followed close in his rear, her face growing white with apprehension. They had proceeded only a short distance when they heard a loud, hoarse shout, that reverberated through the rocky aisles with a strangely hollow sound.

"Charcoal has discovered my flight, and has started on a rampage. I reckon he'll make it hot for us if he meets us."

Phil spoke in a whisper, and moved onward with swift, silent strides. Suddenly he came to a halt, his companion following his example.

Footsteps sounded distinctly in the rocky corridor, and they were approaching rapidly.

"It is Charcoal, and he is coming to see if you are with me. What shall we do, Phil?"

The girl spoke in a terrified whisper, and clung to one hand of our hero. The latter did not reply.

He groped along the wall of the passage, and presently found a sort of niche, in which he speedily ensconced himself, drawing his companion in after him. His action was none too early. The next moment a gleam of light illumined the place, and the heavy tramp of the approaching negro sounded close at hand. A look of deep determination came into the countenance of Prairie Phil. He held the fragment of rock aloft, his every sense keenly alert. Nearer came the footfalls, brighter the gleam of light. In another moment a tall, dark figure shot in view.

With lightning-like quickness the young scout brought his small strong hand forward, hurling his weapon with all his strength.

Hasty as his aim necessarily was, the distance was so short that the missile struck its mark with perfect precision. There was a low moan of pain, a heavy fall, a sudden return of darkness, then all was deathly silent once more. Jennie Grayson shrank yet closer within her retreat.

But Prairie Phil stepped quickly forth, and the next moment he had lighted a match, whose feeble glimmer faintly revealed the silent, motionless form of Charcoal stretched upon the uneven rocks.

Phil picked up the lamp which had fallen from the hand of the negro, and lighted it; then he bent over his victim and made a hasty examination, to see if he was dead. Upon the black brow of the man was a deep gash, from which a purple current trickled, lending his face a hideous aspect; yet it was evident that his thick skull had not been fractured, and that he would recover consciousness in an hour or two.

Phil made haste to possess himself of the weapons with which the man's girdle literally bristled, and then proceeded to bind him securely, hand and foot.

"Now we'll see if there's an outlet to this confounded place. If we can't find it alone, we'll return by-and-by and make Charcoal show us the way. He won't dare to refuse with a pistol at his head, I reckon."

The youth spoke coolly, and seized the hand of the trembling girl.

"Are you sure there are none of the outlaws present except Charcoal?" Jennie questioned.

"There ain't much doubt of it. They are off upon some sort of a raid, and the nigger was left to look after me. They left me insensible, and didn't count on my being a match for him. But I'm no slouch when my disposition's up. Wirt Wiley will find. He'll know more of me afore he does less!"

The youth spoke with half-suppressed passion, his lips closed in his determined way.

With the lamp in one hand and a revolver in the other, our hero resumed his course along the rocky corridor, followed closely by the girl.

He soon reached the large apartment where he had aroused the rattlesnake a little while before.

Of this he made a hasty exploration, but he discovered only the egress by which he had first entered. So he entered this passage and followed it as rapidly as possible until he came into the main corridor, which led to the apartment where he had awakened to consciousness an hour before.

He was eager to find the place whither Charcoal had gone for food when he had started to follow him.

Holding the lamp aloft, he moved slowly forward, looking upon either side for a new opening in the walls of rock. Jennie followed in silence, watching his movements with an expression of deep admiration in her blue eyes. That Prairie Phil was a young god in her heart was plainly evident.

Presently the youth paused, giving utterance to a cry of satisfaction. At his right was a narrow opening, beyond which was a chaos of gloom.

"I reckon I've found what I was looking for at last," he exclaimed.

As he spoke he cautiously entered the narrow opening, and proceeded as before, with cautious, yet rapid strides. Presently they beheld a gleam of light ahead. Phil moved forward more slowly now, occasionally pausing to listen.

All was silent as a tomb.

A minute later they came out into another spacious, lofty room, which was brilliantly illuminated.

They halted and looked about them.

"This is the place where they took me first," said Jennie.

"And do you remember how you entered?"

"No; I was blindfolded, and when they permitted me to see, I was in this room."

Phil surveyed the cavern apartment with curiosity.

There was no furniture save a rude table and two or three small benches.

In one corner was a heap of buffalo and bear skins, and in another a limited assortment of cooking utensils; and in a small niche were charred sticks, indicating that it had been used as a fire-place. The latter caused the hopes of our hero to rise. If a fire had been built there, an opening must exist close by to give vent to the smoke.

He boldly approached the niche and glanced upward. To his delight he espied an aperture above through which he could see the light of day. At that moment he heard a low cry of horror from the lips of his companion. Turning, he beheld a strange, weird figure standing at one side of the apartment.

CHAPTER XIV.

A TERRIBLE CONFLICT.

INSTANTLY our hero raised his revolver and leveled it at the head of the odd-looking being.

"Who and what are you?" Phil exclaimed, in his calm, clear tones.

Jennie ran softly to his side, placing one hand confidently upon his arm.

"They call him Little Jack," she whispered, her form trembling with fear. "He brought me my food several times, and I think they must keep him here as a sentinel. What a strange, beast-like face he has!"

The man, if such indeed he was, could not have been more than four feet in height, but in figure he was nearly as bulky and muscular as the gigantic Charcoal.

His arms were long, reaching nearly to the floor; his head large and bullet-shaped; his hair and beard, of a fiery-red hue, were long and shaggy.

His countenance had very little like a human expression about it, and beneath his great, red mustache gleamed a double row of yellow, fang-like teeth.

It was, indeed, a hideous object; yet there could be no doubt of it being a man. And presently the fact that he had human intelligence and the power of speech was made manifest.

He did not seem to fear the leveled revolver of the young guide. Instead of retreating, he stepped silently toward his foe, his great red hands opening and closing menacingly. He paused within a dozen paces of Phil, and exclaimed, in a deep, growling voice:

"Put down yer we'pins, youngster, onless yer wants ter be teetotally chawed! I'm Little Jack, but I eats full-growed men when I'm hungry. D'yer hear?"

Prairie Phil's eyes flashed defiance, and the weapon in his hand seemed fixed in solid rock, so motionless did it remain.

"I reckon you're talking rather heavy, considering that I hold the trump card just now," uttered the youth.

A hoarse, chuckling laugh came from between the rows of yellow teeth, and the hideous countenance became yet more repulsive.

"Trump keerd, eh!" he repeated, shrugging his great, square shoulders. "Mebby, and mebbly not! Thar may be a higher trump'n your'n that'll clean the board. I perpose not to be skeered by a pistol, youngster, and wot's more, I perpose ter take that plaything away from yer. Gwine ter drop it, or not?"

The young guide stared at his singular foe in consternation. Had he indeed no fear for a deadly weapon pointed directly at his heart? Or were his words simply a sign of bravado, and intended to terrify or throw our hero off his guard? Whatever the intention of Little Jack, Phil had not thought of being terrified, nor of dropping his weapons. He resolved to give the dwarf a chance to surrender without resistance. If he refused, then he might take the consequences. There was no time for parleying, for others of the robber-band might arrive at any moment.

"I shall not drop my weapons, but unless you do yours, and right quickly, I'll put every ball there is in this revolver in your carcass—and there are seven of them!"

Phil spoke in a low, intense tone, that showed him to be in deadly earnest.

Again that strange, chuckling sound rang through the cavern room.

"No use, youngster, 'cause Little Jack allers has his own way. He don't perpose to drop his weapons. He do perpose to use 'em!"

At the instant the growling tones ceased the

short, heavy figure of the dwarf shot upward in the air, and descended like a panther almost upon the astounded Phil. The latter fired almost at the same instant, but the maneuver of his enemy was so unexpected and lightning-like in its quickness that the shot did not strike a vital part of his person. That it was not thrown away, however, was proven by several drops of blood which fell upon the floor of the cavern.

Jennie Grayson uttered a wild scream of terror as she saw the burly figure of Little Jack descending upon them. She leaped backward, but her companion only stepped to one side, while his weapon was leveled a second time, and another spiteful report rent the air.

There was a hoarse howl of mingled pain and rage from the dwarf, and before our hero could again cock the revolver, it was knocked from his hand, and sent with fearful velocity across the cavern apartment.

Quickly the hand of the young guide flew to his belt, and the next instant Charcoal's knife flashed in the red lamplight.

At the same moment one of the monstrous hands of his enemy closed upon his arm, and he found himself locked in an iron embrace.

Prairie Phil's long slumber had recuperated his energies to a remarkable degree, and the muscles of his arms swelled with sudden power.

But he found the strength of his opponent to be resistless. Had he been in the embrace of a grizzly bear he would not have been more helpless at that moment. For a minute the combatants remained almost motionless, each exerting his powers to the utmost, each on the alert for some unexpected maneuver of his opponent.

Phil realized that, in point of brute strength, his adversary had a marked advantage. But if he could but free the hand holding his knife, he could soon test the skill of the dwarf in another direction.

Exerting all his strength in a single effort, our hero succeeded in lifting his foe from the ground. Then, by the advantage of his superior height, he hurled him backward with terrific force upon the hard floor of the cavern.

For a brief instant Little Jack lay as though stunned, one arm still encircling the form of our hero. The latter raised his knife, and in another instant would have buried it in the breast of his foe.

But the latter seemed to have the power of extricating himself from every difficulty, however helpless he might seem. By a quick movement, he seized the wrist of our hero again, and held the threatening knife aloft, despite every effort the other could put forth to bring it down.

In another moment the twain went past the terrified girl in rapid, bewildering evolutions.

Jennie Grayson crouched, white and trembling, close to the wall of the cavern, and watched the struggling men with a sort of fascinated gaze. She could hear their loud breathing, and now and then the sounds of dull, sudden blows. Oh! if she could only do something to assist her friend, for it seemed to her impossible that he should overpower the brute-like strength of Little Jack.

A sudden courageous impulse came into her heart, and she stood erect and approached the combatants. She uttered a low cry of intense horror as she noted their position.

As she had feared, the dwarf was gaining an advantage over his opponent.

He had pinioned both arms of the youth, and was holding him down with his monstrous weight, while one red, hairy hand grasped the throat of the young guide.

The girl cast one quick, despairing glance about the room for some means of defense.

Her eye caught the revolver where it had been sent by the quick blow of the dwarf from the hand of Prairie Phil. Quickly she ran and picked it up. To her delight, she found that it was uninjured, and cocking it, she returned to the side of the combatants.

She beheld the face of the youth growing purple in hue, while his eyes seemed bulging from their sockets. In nervous haste she raised the weapon, directing it toward the shaggy head of the dwarf. There was a ringing report, a groan of pain, and the monster fell forward upon his face, a purple current oozing from a wound upon his temple. His great red hand still clasped the throat of the young guide, but the force of the grip was gone.

For a minute Jennie Grayson stood silent and trembling, staring at the disgusting spectacle. She experienced a sense of faintness, and her limbs shook beneath her weight. She sank down within arm's-length of the late combatants, panting for breath, and gazing at the face of Prairie Phil with an intense, anxious expression.

The latter, though his throat was relieved of

the powerful pressure of his opponent's hand, made no movement to give sign of life or animation. The purplish hue fled from his countenance, and it grew deathly white, while his eyes were closed.

Was he dead? Had her action been too late, after all?

With electric rapidity such questions as these flashed through the brain of the girl, and vainly she tried to form some plan of action—to think of something which she might do to determine the result of the contest.

Gradually she succeeded in overcoming the sense of faintness which had come upon her, and again arose to her feet. Hastily she searched the apartment for some means of resuscitating her friend, and at last her eye caught sight of a narrow rocky shelf high upon the wall, covered with cooking utensils. Among other things she noticed a black wicker flask, and the sight of it lent her renewed hope.

With some difficulty she succeeded in possessing herself of the flask, and upon investigation she found it to contain a quantity of whiskey.

The quality she did not attempt to test; had she done so it is doubtful if she could have pursued her process of resuscitating the youth, at least, for a time.

Using all her strength to do so, she managed to roll the inanimate body of Little Jack from that of our hero. Then she bent over the latter and bathed his head and wrists with the liquor, and poured a few drops between his teeth.

The effect was magical.

There was a spasmodic movement of the youth's muscles, and a faint tinge of color mantled his pale cheeks. In another moment he sat erect, and gazed about him with a bewildered expression.

"Oh, Phil—Phil! how glad I am that you did not die!" exclaimed the girl, throwing her arms around the neck of our hero with impulsive joy.

Her eyes filled with tears, and a bright flush suffused her cheeks.

"Where is he—Little Jack, I mean?" the youth gasped, with an apprehensive glance around the apartment.

"I shot him, and I think he must be dead. He was killing you, Phil, and I saved your life. Can't you thank me? If you had died I should not have cared to live, I believe!"

He looked into her eyes and beheld them filled with tears. Acting upon an impulse he pressed his lips to hers, held so temptingly near.

"I do thank you, Jennie, with all my heart. You are a brave, true girl, and there are not many that would have done as you have. You deserve to love a better fellow than I am; but I'll try and make myself worthy of you."

He did not say that he loved her. Somehow, he felt as though he was acting traitorously in thus accepting the affection of this honest girl when he had so long been seeking to win that of Cora Bland.

"It seems so good to have you say that, Phil!" the girl exclaimed, her face glowing with sudden joy.

But Prairie Phil scarce heard her words, or noted the glad light in her eyes. A new sound fell upon his ears—a sound that filled his heart with horror and dismay. There was the tramp of heavy feet, and they were drawing momentarily nearer.

"The outlaws are coming, Jennie, and we must find a place of concealment. I'm afraid it's all up with us after all!"

CHAPTER XV.

CHARCOAL'S TREACHERY.

THE girl sprang to her feet, her face growing deathly white once more. And with one hand she tugged at the arm of her companion.

Phil staggered upon his feet and glanced hastily around the apartment. He felt himself miserably weak, and realized that he was in no condition for sustaining another contest. The revolver which Jennie had used so effectively lay upon the floor of the cavern, and he seized it quickly.

The sounds of footsteps were drawing nearer, and they were coming from the direction whence Little Jack had made his appearance. Therefore retreat was cut off in that direction. There was no way left except that by which they had come; and that would offer no hope of ultimate escape.

"Come, Jennie, there's no way for us except to retrace our steps. We are caught like beavers, and I'm afraid it will go hard with us. Come!"

Prairie Phil seized the small lamp and darted quickly into the passage-way, his companion following close at his heels.

They had not proceeded a dozen paces ere a hoarse shout of dismay came to their ears.

"They've found Little Jack, and will know something is wrong. We must run for it. If I can find the right sort of retreat I'll send more than one of the varmints o his last home rather than be taken. It will be the worse for them if they push me too far."

The youth spoke in a tone of grim determination.

On they ran, panting breathlessly, until our hero found he could go no further without pausing to regain breath.

They were at a narrow point of the rocky corridor, and a current of air caused their light to flicker fitfully.

They could hear gruff shouts in their rear, but as yet there were no sounds of pursuit.

Only for a minute or two did the twain remain stationary.

Then they moved forward again, not so rapidly as before, but still with swift, silent strides. Suddenly a new sound smote their ears. Phil halted, and bent his head in a listening attitude.

Footsteps were approaching, and the sounds were before them instead of in their rear. Before the twain could fairly realize that such was indeed the fact, they beheld a dark, gigantic figure emerge around an abrupt turn of the passage.

It was the foe whom our hero had left bound hand and foot a little while before—the giant African called Charcoal.

There was a gruff exclamation from the lips of the negro, and he came to a halt. In an instant he was covered by a leveled revolver in the hand of the young guide.

"You've come far enough for this time. If you stir, hand or foot, I'll blow your black brains to glory!" exclaimed the youth.

The figure of Charcoal shook with terror, and his ebon countenance assumed a greyish hue, while his eyes rolled almost ludicrously. A new idea occurred to our hero in that brief moment of his dilemma, and he proceeded at once to carry it out. Speaking in a tone calculated to inspire the African with terror, he exclaimed:

"I see you've broken your bonds, and now that you're free you've got to serve us a good turn. I had you at my mercy a little while ago, and might have killed you. But I wouldn't take advantage of you in that way, and you shall not be harmed now if you do as I tell you. We want to get clear of this place, and if you'll lead us out you may go free. But the first sign of treachery will send you to glory—remember that!"

This threat seemed to bring the African to his senses.

"Golly! do!—don't fire, please don't! I'll show yer de way out, or do anyting dat you say—on'y do!—don't shoot!" he exclaimed, with an exaggerated show of terror.

"Then be lively about it, for we've no time to lose."

"You jess turn 'roun' and go de way yer's comin' from, an' yer'll find de way out. I'll show yer de way 'f yer'll on'y lemme get by where yer stan'. I darsn't do anyting wid de 'volver p'intin' at me in dat way."

The negro did not stir from his tracks. The hopes of our hero suddenly sank several degrees. Was there indeed but one exit to this underground labyrinth? If such was the fact the negro could be of no service to them.

"We can't get out that way, for your friends have come and cut off escape in that direction. But there must be some other way to get out, and you must find it for us. Now, remember what I've promised you upon the first sign of treachery."

Charcoal hesitated, as though debating with himself whether to obey or not. At last, he said:

"Dar's one mo' way to get out, but it's a long ways 'roun'. Keep close 'hind my heels or yer'll lose de way. Come!"

As he spoke he turned abruptly and retraced his steps. Still holding his weapon in readiness for instant use, our hero followed, Jennie Grayson walking close in his footsteps.

Presently their guide turned into a broader corridor, which they followed for a considerable distance. Then another turn was made, and then another. Still there was no sign of an exit before them. Prairie Phil began to grow suspicious.

"How much further have we got to go?" he questioned, coming abruptly to a halt.

"We're most dar—only a few more steps," returned their guide, still striding swiftly forward.

Our friends were obliged to hasten to keep him in view, for he at that moment made another

turn to the right. As they followed, they heard the sounds of gruff voices close at hand. At the same moment they beheld a gleam of light a few paces ahead, and Charcoal's tall figure suddenly darted around a jutting rock. Then a chorus of shouts rent the air, and rapid footsteps approached. In a moment the horrible truth flashed upon the brain of our hero.

Charcoal had led them, by a devious route, to the very point whence they had started!

He turned quickly and communicated his discovery to his companion, whose face had grown deathly white as the startling sounds came to their ears.

Before they could retreat a dozen paces, lights flashed before their eyes, and they beheld several dark figures approaching.

"There's no use, Jennie! We're caught like rats in a trap, and resistance will only doom us to a worse fate than surrender will. If I was alone I would make a fight for my liberty. But to do so now would only leave you without a protector, for they wouldn't hesitate to shoot me in my tracks."

The youth said this in a low voice in the ear of his companion. Before she could reply they were confronted by three stalwart forms, and a gruff, triumphant voice exclaimed:

"Here's the young wildcat, and the gal is with him. I reckon they won't try sich a caper a second time, ef we kin help it, and I reckon we kin!"

Prairie Phil did not stir from his tracks, and his fair, boyish face wore an expression of cool defiance. But he offered no resistance as the heavy hand of the outlaw fell upon his shoulder, and drew him forward in the direction of the cavern apartment. Another ruffian seized the arm of Jennie, and the next moment the captives were standing in the dimly-lighted cavern. Phil had been speedily deprived of his weapons, and once more he realized his utter helplessness in the power of his foes.

With some curiosity he glanced about him upon the novel scene. The full force of the outlaw band were evidently assembled, and there were fully a score of them. In the center of the group was their leader, Wirt Wiley, otherwise, Dick Hilders, as he was called among his rough associates. And beyond the slender, graceful figure of the outlaw captain was another form, crouching in a shrinking posture close to the wall of the apartment.

Our hero could not repress a cry of surprise and dismay as he recognized the latter.

At first it seemed to him that it must all prove a deception of his excited vision. But the more he gazed the more positive he became of the identity of that shrinking form. It was Cora Bland.

Wirt Wiley noted his glance and the expression of amazement that crossed his face, and smiled exultantly.

"You see that my turn has come, Prairie Phil," he exclaimed, in his smooth, quiet tones.

"I see that you are no better than the reputation of Dick Hilders has made you out," retorted the youth, his face flushing with pent up rage.

"I don't claim to be a saint, my boy, and I you'll find out that I'm far from being one by-and-by. But we haven't time to parley now. There is serious business afoot, and these captives must be placed in safe quarters, and left to themselves for the present. Every man will be needed here to defend the entrance of our retreat. Come, there is no time to lose."

His last remarks were directed to his comrades. Instantly the hands of Phil and his companion were bound, and with the treacherous Charcoal and a burly white outlaw as guards, the three captives were led once more along the narrow, rocky corridor. The two girls were placed in the apartment in which Phil had first discovered Jennie, while the young guide was returned to the place where he had awakened to consciousness.

The latter was securely bound, and left totally helpless upon the heap of robes. No guard was left with him, but he realized that an attempt to escape would amount to naught.

The two girls were not bound so helplessly, their arms being left free. As soon as the outlaws had departed, they were clasped in each other's embrace, weeping, and relating, between their sobs, the story of their experiences.

It will be remembered that we left Cora Bland in the belt of timber close to the creek. She had just been startled by the sound of a light footstep close in her rear. Turning, she had found herself confronted by a man whose face was painted like that of an Indian warrior, but, even in her horror she felt an instinctive conviction that it was a white man in disguise. She had no time to flee. In a moment a heavy hand

fell upon her arm, and she was raised from the ground as though she had been but an infant, and borne swiftly through the timber. A little later her captor was joined by four other outlaws, who made no attempt at disguising their color. We will not detail the long, weary journey of her captors, which took her further and further away from her friends.

At lone rock they had been joined by Wirt Wiley and others of gang, and all had entered the outlaw retreat together.

In the meantime, while the two girls were sobbing and talking as girls will do sometimes, and our hero was lying grim, impatient, but helpless upon the heap of robes, events of a startling character were being enacted among the outlaws.

Scarce had Charcoal and his companion returned to the main cavern ere a wild, thrilling shout rent the air, which brought every man to his feet. An instant later a half-breed rushed in, his dusky face ashy pale in his terror.

"They're coming, and we've got to fight. There's no such thing as running away from them!"

The half-breed spoke in tones of grim determination. In an instant a knife and revolver flashed in every hand. Above the gruff oaths and vengeful expletives of the outlaws sounded the clear tones of their chief. Slender and effeminate as Wirt Wiley had appeared, there was no sign of fear upon his fair, youthful countenance now.

"Keep cool, boys, and don't throw away an ounce of lead or steel. That accursed scout, Nick Wharton, has trailed us where every other trailer has failed, and he must pay the penalty with his life, if not one of us survives to tell the story. Don't a single one of you spare him. Let every man fight for his own life, for the dogs won't show us a bit of mercy. Here they come!"

Scarce had the words passed his lips ere the sounds of pistol-shots rang on the air. In another moment the cavern swarmed with men, and a thunderous voice sounded above the din of strife:

"Gin 'em partick'ler glory, boyees, an' don't spare a man. Hyer's a 'tarnal tangle fur the varmints, an' no mistake."

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

THAT the reader may understand more fully the sudden attack upon the outlaws, we will give a few words of explanation.

That the vicinity of Cottonwood Bend was not the habitual haunt of the old trapper, Nick Wharton, we have already intimated. Nevertheless he had roamed over almost the entire western wilderness in the course of his remarkable career, and his fame as a scout, guide and trailer was wide-spread.

The depredations of Dick Hilders' gang had called forth the best efforts of the settlers, and even of the U. S. troops to trace them to their retreat. But all in vain.

It was finally agreed that if any man in the world could trail them to their lair, Nick Wharton was the man. Therefore, a messenger was despatched to his headquarters to secure his services. Ever ready for an undertaking of the sort, no matter how difficult it promised to be, the old trapper returned with the messenger to the settlement, and immediately entered upon his mission.

By some means the outlaw leader got wind of the attack, and called his band together just in time to make an effective defense.

Within an hour after Prairie Phil had become separated from the old trailer, the latter had been joined by the band of settlers, numbering a full score of well-armed, determined men.

After some delays they had made their way to the outlaw stronghold, where they arrived shortly subsequent to the coming of the outlaws themselves.

The giant form of the old scout towered above the heads of both friends and foes, and the latter endeavored to concentrate their efforts upon his destruction.

But they found themselves matched—man to man—and in a few minutes the tide of battle began to tell against them.

After one or two volleys from the revolvers of each party, they came into such close quarters that the use of firearms was abandoned, and knives were called into requisition.

Then it became a hand-to-hand conflict, each man for himself.

Despite the concentrated efforts of the outlaws, the old scout continued to wield his powerful

arms with undiminished effect, apparently unharmed by bullet or knife—and at last he found himself face to face with the slender outlaw leader.

Around them the battle raged with diminished fury, for more than half the ruffians and two or three of the settlers had fallen, dead or disabled. Yet the countenance of Wirt Wiley was dark with intense, unyielding determination.

He attacked his giant adversary with all his skill and pent-up fury. For the first time that day Nick Wharton found that he had an opponent worthy of his steel.

Skill, agility, and prodigious strength dwelt in the slender figure of the young leader, and Nick received several painful wounds before he was prepared to meet such a combination of prowess.

Watching his opportunity and parrying the rapid thrusts of his enemy, Nick at last succeeded in closing with him and hurling him upon the hard floor of the cavern. Then his enormous weight and muscular power soon settled the contest. A moment later he had disarmed the young man, and was holding him down with pinioned arms, and his ponderous knee upon his breast.

"Ye deserve to have yer life tangle ended right hyar, youngster; but the Lord forgive my takin' human life onnecessarily. Yer trial afore a jury shall settle yer score. If they say let ye live, then live ye shall, if I have to fight to save ye!"

As the scout said this, he proceeded to bind his foe securely, the latter submitting in sullen silence.

By this time the conflict had ceased, and the triumphant settlers were securing the surviving outlaws. Among the latter was the negro, Charcoal, and he was commanded to bring forward the captives. As he dared not disobey, he led the way to the apartments in which Prairie Phil and the two girls were confined, and they were liberated.

After the joyful greeting of the reunited friends were over, Phil took a survey of the dead and wounded outlaws, the latter lying helplessly bound by themselves. Suddenly he gave utterance to a cry of recognition, and he bent over one of the motionless forms.

The man was fatally wounded, and was breathing painfully. As the youth bent over him, he opened his eyes, and stared up into the boyish countenance. He uttered a gasp of intense amazement, and attempted to rise to a sitting posture. But he fell back with a groan of agony.

"Mountain Ned! and here!" exclaimed our hero, in a tone of intense surprise.

The man did not reply for several minutes. At last he said, his voice husky and scarcely audible:

"Yes, Phil, it's Mountain Ned, and he's taking in his last breaths, I reckon. It's lucky you're here, for I didn't want to die 'thout telling you more 'bout yourself than I ever did. I meant to do it afore I deserted you, but circumstances prevented."

An eager expression came into the face of our hero, and he bent his head yet closer to the grizzled beard of the outlaw.

"If you can tell me who I am, and where I belong, do so, for it is a subject that I can't banish from my mind night nor day," said the youth.

"I'll do it, Phil. Just call one or two of your friends nearer, so that they can hear my confession. It will help you to settle your claims, and

I want to right things that I've made wrong all I can afore I meet my Maker. I'm afeard he won't show much mercy to sich as I, at least."

At a word from our hero, the settlers gathered around the dying outlaw, and listened to his story. To make it brief as possible, we will repeat the substance in our own words. The true name of Mountain Ned was Edward Minton, and the first thirty years of his life had been spent in an eastern town. He had been a somewhat dissolute and unprincipled man, and was ready to accept any employment that offered fair remuneration without regard for legitimacy.

In the town where he then resided lived two wealthy young men, partners in a mercantile business, named, respectively, Willard Harrison and George Durkee. The former was a strictly honorable gentleman, and had many warm friends. But his partner, though ostensibly honest and agreeable in business transactions, was at heart passionate, impulsive and unscrupulous. Yet the two were friends, until an event happened which has been the frequent cause of estranging friendship. Both young men fell in love with a beautiful young lady whose name was Jennie Gilson, and a fierce rivalry sprang up between them. Harrison was successful in his suit, and shortly after, the couple were married. Durkee was almost crazed with jealous rage; the business partnership was dissolved, and he left town, swearing vengeance upon his successful rival. Nothing was seen or heard of him for nearly four years, but at the end of that period he again made his appearance in the town. In the meantime his rival had prospered in business, but his beautiful wife, whom he had almost idolized, had lost her life in giving birth to her second child—a girl. Half frantic with grief, the young man concentrated all his affection upon his two children, the oldest, nearly three years of age, being a boy. George Durkee secretly rejoiced at the bereavement of his rival, and yet was not satisfied with the grief he had already suffered.

He resolved to wring his heart with renewed pangs—to blight his entire future existence. In pursuance of his fell purpose he made a nefarious bargain with the unscrupulous Minton, who was to abduct the two children of Harrison. The plot was carefully laid, and successfully executed. The girl, only a few months old, was lodged in an orphan asylum, while Minton carried the boy with him to the far west. This boy, it is needless to explain, is our hero, Philip Harrison. Of the girl Minton did not fail to keep track, and through his influence he had her brought also to the west—to Cottonwood Bend. And this girl, as the reader has doubtless guessed by this time, is the gentle Jennie Grayson—and therefore, the sister of Prairie Phil. As he finished his narrative Mountain Ned drew a small package from the bosom of his hunting shirt, and gave it into the hands of our hero, saying, in his husky, gasping tones:

"There's a few trinkets that belong to you and the gal, and they may help you to prove your identity. It's the best I can do for you now, for my race is 'bout run. I reckon you'll get things straightened somehow, and sometime!"

Those were the last words the outlaw ever uttered. The warning rattle sounded in his throat, and his scarred and sinful spirit took its flight—who shall say whither?

Of course the romantic revelations of the dying outlaw were a great surprise to our hero, to Jennie, and to the interested settlers who listen-

ed to the narrative. Perhaps Jennie was just a trifle disappointed at first, for she had liked Phil almost *too well* for a brother. But if such was the case, she succeeded in overcoming it very well, and now came to look upon the matter in the light of glorious good fortune. And Cora Bland congratulated the twain very warmly, and it occurred to our hero, even at that interesting moment, that Cora and Jennie ought to become sisters.

Perhaps Cora thought of it, too, but as young ladies are not given to volunteering information upon such points, we are unable to say what reflections she had in the premises.

As soon as the necessary preparations could be made, the settlers started upon their return to Cottonwood Bend with the captive outlaws and their dead and wounded comrades. Their journey was necessarily slow, and they did not arrive at the settlement until nearly two days later. Of course there were both grief and rejoicing upon their return, for more than one settler's wife had been made a widow by the expedition.

With the assistance of his many friends, Prairie Phil began the undertaking of finding his father. He went to Omaha, and afterward to Chicago, and from the latter place sent dispatches to the town in which his father had dwelt at the time of his abduction. At last he received a reply, with the intelligence that his father, Willard Harrison, was residing in Cincinnati, and giving his business address.

Our hero went directly to that city, and had no difficulty in finding the object of his quest. The proofs of his identity were more than sufficient. Willard Harrison, a prematurely aged man, was almost crazed with his new-found joy, and our hero at last felt that he had found a parent well worth his long waiting and hopeless search.

Father and son returned to Cottonwood Bend, where another joyful reunion took place. He could scarce realize that the beautiful young lady whom we have known as Jennie Grayson, was the same as the infant daughter whom he had lost so many years ago. Yet he had no doubts of her identity. The proofs, together with her marked resemblance to her beautiful mother, precluded all doubts.

A few more words and our story will be done.

Willard Harrison took up his residence in the settlement where his children had made so many friends, and two years later he blessed the union of our young hero and Cora Bland. And he had sufficient wealth to give them an excellent start in life, though that did not prevent Phil from going to work to make a fortune for himself.

When we heard from them last, they were living very happily, and were deservedly prosperous.

Jennie Harrison has not yet accepted any man as her husband, but dwells with her grey-haired father as his housekeeper.

Wirt Wiley and the other captured outlaws had their trial, were convicted of their crimes, and were riddled with rifle-bullets, in genuine frontier style.

And now you all wonder what has become of the eccentric trapper, Nick Wharton. Well, all we can say of him is that he still lives, trapping, hunting and trailing in the far northwest. He still encounters "tarnal tangles," but escapes them all in his happy-go-lucky fashion.

We shall take care not to lose sight of him, and when our readers hear from us again, they may hear from Nick Wharton also.

[THE END.]

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